

Celebrating African American History

February 2019 – Week 1

28 biographies for 28 days
compiled by Reverend Carolyn Matthews

Ida B Wells Barnett

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth on them.”

Ida B. Wells is more than the name of now demolished, once demonized housing project in Chicago.

Ida B. Wells Barnett was born in 1862 – a turbulent time, a time when the United States was not united but in the midst of a conflict, a war that would determine the country’s future in a profound way. Her upbringing and childhood would present experiences that would test her spirit and character in crucial ways.

A yellow fever epidemic swept through her town when Ida was away and it claimed the lives of her parents and some of her siblings. Despite objections from relatives she returned to her remaining siblings. Ida’s father was a carpenter who had done well in business and was a Mason. His lodge brothers got together and were going to care for the children but it would involve splitting them up. After some discussion, Ida rose and said she would care for the children. Although there was some money left by her father, Ida needed a job. At sixteen years old she passed the teacher’s exam and was appointed a teacher.

This early resolve served her well as she navigated her way in life during a time when the country was not kind, to say the least, to women and especially women of color. Yet Ida became a significant person in the history of America. She wrote for several newspapers, including the Chicago Defender; founded women’s clubs; and she was at the meeting which established the NAACP and made a place for herself at the table – however the relationship with the organization was “rocky.” She wrote of the horrors of racism including an investigative story about the conditions of the colored elementary schools in the Memphis school district. However, her greatest advocacy came in her writing and taking up the cause against lynching. She wrote and traveled throughout the country and world making people aware of this painful, disgusting, and unjust practice.

The Supreme Court, in 1883, declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, which meant that the railroads could remove Black people from first class cars. Not long after this decision, Ida boarded a train in Memphis and as was her habit (and had paid for it) sat in the ladies’ coach in first class. When the conductor told her to move and when she refused to do so the conductor laid hands on her and she bit down on his hand. It took three men to force her from the train. She sued the railroad for damages and was awarded \$500 – “Wells vs. Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern.”

Ida B. Wells Barnett died at the age of 69 in 1931. Her daughter, Alfreda Barnett Duster wrote of her: “The most remarkable thing about Ida B. Wells Barnett is not that she fought lynching and

other forms of barbarianism...It is rather that she fought a lonely and almost single handed fight, with the singlemindedness of a crusader, long before men or women of any race entered the arena." Wells Barnett's life is truly a testament to what one dedicated, determined individual can accomplish; a person dedicated with resolve to righting societal wrongs.

Taken from and further reading:

"Black Foremothers: Three Lives" by Dorothy Sterling

"Fifty Black Women Who Changed the World" by Amy Alexander

"The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader" edited by Mia Bay

"Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells"

Dorothy West (1907-1998)

Today we consider, for me, a newly discovered voice of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, spanning the 1920s. During the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement", named after the 1925 anthology by Alain Locke, who is also considered the father of the Harlem Renaissance. Last year I discovered the "midwife" of the movement, Jessie Redmon Fausset. Today we consider, "the Kid (so nicknamed by Langston Hughes)".

Dorothy West was born on June 2, 1907, in Boston, Massachusetts. The daughter of a freed slave, West had a fairly affluent upbringing and started writing stories as a child earning recognition for her work as a teenager. Her story, "Promise and Fulfillment," won a contest and was published in a local newspaper.

Another story, "The Typewriter," earned her a trip to New York City in 1926. It tied for second prize with a work by Zora Neale Hurston in an "Opportunity" magazine contest. In an interview later in life West said: "God allowed me to share a second prize with the now legendary, Zora Neale Hurston. At first [Zora] had mixed feelings about sharing a prize with an unknown teenager. But in time I became her little sister and my affection for her has not diminished." West decided to stay in New York and became affiliated with the burgeoning arts scene in the city's Harlem neighborhood, which was later known as the Harlem Renaissance. She befriended poet Langston Hughes and other members of this artistic and literary community. She and other authors, through their writing, expressed an obsession with color and gradations of color and its importance and effect on one's station in Negro society. It had been a significant part of her life and family relationships. This idea is clearly seen in novels with titles such, "The Blacker the Berry" by Wallace Thurman and "Passing" by Nella Larsen.

In the early 1930s, West and Hughes traveled to Russia with a group of African Americans. She originally intended on making a film about racism there, but the project fell apart. West decided to stay on for a while after that, fascinated by the country.

After the death of her father, West returned to the United States and soon established a literary magazine called "Challenge." She served as the magazine's editor and published works by many leading African-American writers of the day, including Hughes and Hurston. After several years, she stopped publishing the magazine. West tried another magazine venture with writer Richard Wright called "New Challenge," but this effort was short-lived.

West found work as a member of the Works Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project in the late 1930s. While with the WPA, she wrote numerous stories. The project ended in the '40s, and West soon made some changes in her life. Her family had a summer home on the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, which she had often visited. In 1947, West made it her permanent home. While living there, she completed her first novel, *The Living Is Easy* (1948). The work explored racial, economic, and social tensions within the African-American community through the examination of one family. The main character, Cleo Judson, marries into money and asks her three sisters and their husbands to stay with her and her new husband. Critical response to the work was mostly positive, but it failed to attract a large audience.

West settled into life on Martha's Vineyard, working as a journalist at a local newspaper. While she had an idea for another novel, she put it on the back burner. Her writing for the newspaper caught the interest of another area resident who was an editor at Doubleday. At the insistence and with the encouragement of the editor, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, West continued work on, and completed her second novel, *The Wedding* (1995). West once again garnered praise from critics, who lauded the work's multigenerational look at class and racial issues regarding an affluent African-American family. The book also sparked a renewed interest in her other writings and led to the publication of the collection *The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches and Reminiscences* (1995). "The Wedding" was made into a two part miniseries in 1998.

Dorothy West died on August 16, 1998, in Boston, Massachusetts. Today, she's remembered for her sharp observations of economic, social, racial, and gender issues within the African-American community.

For full article and further reading:

<https://www.biography.com/people/dorothy-west-40051>

"The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance" by Carole Marks and Diana Edkins

"Extraordinary People of the Harlem Renaissance" by P. Stephen Hardy and Sheila Jackson Hardy

Constance Baker Motley (1921-2005)

I can't quite remember where I first encountered today's entry for this month. Was it a book? Perhaps her name was mentioned in relation to someone else. What I do have etched in my memory is her sitting with a group of other lawyers who were part of the NAACP legal defense team. She isn't as well known as the person for whom she clerked, but her impact has had just as much import on the lives of many people in this country. Most people are familiar with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that struck down school segregation. What I did not know until now, was that Constance Baker Motley wrote the first brief, in 1950, which resulted in that historic decision. Her record speaks for itself. As an African American woman, her achievements set new standards for what was possible for all women: she was the first black woman to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court, the first black woman to be elected to the New York State Senate, the first to be elected President of the Borough Council of Manhattan, and the first black woman ever appointed to the Federal bench (to the southern district of New York in 1964 by Lyndon Johnson). But it was her courageous legal work for victims of discrimination and oppression in the Deep South that makes her a pivotal figure in American history.

Constance Baker was born in 1921, the ninth of twelve children, to immigrant parents from the West Indian island of Nevis. (And let me say this again, where and what would America be without those who found homes here from distant lands!) Her father was a chef at Yale, her mother a domestic worker. Too poor to attend college, young Baker's organizing and speaking on behalf of her neighborhood community center prompted local philanthropist, Clarence Blakeslee, to offer her funds in 1939 to attend the college of her choice. She chose Fisk University in Nashville, TN, but once there experienced southern-style segregation, and quickly transferred to NYU, where she earned her undergraduate degree in 1943. She enrolled next at Columbia Law School and graduated in 1946, the same year she married her husband, Joel Motley, a lawyer and real estate broker, and joined the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) as a full-time staff member under its leader, Thurgood Marshall.

Under Marshall, she was involved in every important civil rights case of the era, quickly rising to prominence at the center of America's civil rights firestorms in the 1950s and '60s. Her work as a brilliant lawyer and key strategist with the NAACP's LDF (1946-66) brought her into close association with Dr. Martin Luther King, where she played critical roles that helped desegregate southern schools, buses, and lunch counters.

"She was a dogged opponent of Southern segregationists, who found her tougher than Grant at Vicksburg," said Jack Greenberg, leader of the LDF after Thurgood Marshall was appointed federal judge. As the first African American woman to argue before the US Supreme Court, Motley won nine of her ten cases, including the landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and her equally famous 1962 James Meredith desegregation case at the University of Mississippi. The tenth decision, which would have allowed blacks to sit on juries, was eventually overturned in her favor. There were also the legal cases she argued in lower courts for integration at the University of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. As a Federal Judge, in 1978, her breakthrough decision for women in sports broadcasting allowed female reporters into the locker rooms of Major League Baseball.

While Motley's is not well known, we do know the names—and perhaps remember many of the cases—that illuminated national personalities and stories. Besides James Meredith, there was Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who Motley got admitted as the first black to the University of Georgia at Albany in 1961. Hunter-Gault went on to become a star on PBS' *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, a chief correspondent for National Public Radio, as well as a writer for the *New York Times*. Harvey Gantt followed in 1963 at Clemson University in South Carolina. He went on to found his own architectural firm, and then became mayor of Charlotte, SC.

Motley won a difficult court victory for Vivian Malone Jones in the second University of Alabama case in 1963, despite opposition from the state's governor, George Wallace. But Motley succeeded in getting Malone admitted, and she went on to work in the civil rights division of the U.S. Justice Department.

In perhaps the most notorious case, known as the "Little Rock Nine," Attorney Motley successfully won enrollment for nine black high school students at racially segregated Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. With court order in-hand, the nine students were physically blocked from the school by Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, using his state's National Guard. This precipitated the "Little Rock Crisis" in which President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to the city to quell the white opposition, and escort the students into class. He also federalized the entire 10,000-man Arkansas National Guard, effectively taking

their deployment out of the hands of Gov. Faubus and defusing the situation, and setting an important precedent.

Working with Dr. King, Motley's persistent legal advocacy brought rulings that not only ended segregation in southern schools, but also desegregated countless restaurants and whites-only lunch counters in Tennessee and Alabama. She petitioned for King's right to march in Georgia, and visited him in jail as his lawyer. She sang freedom songs in fire-bombed black churches, and spent time in Mississippi under armed guard helping to protect Medgar Evers, the famed civil rights leader, later murdered in 1963 by a white supremacist. Motley constantly imperiled her own life by being in the courts of the Deep South at a time and place where racial tensions burned white-hot. In her 1998 autobiography, "Equal Justice Under Law", Motley cautioned that racism has not been eradicated and will "follow us and bewilder us" into the next century. Let me interject here that she was absolutely correct as we can see with what is going on in our country today.

Motley remained on the federal bench in New York, including a term as Chief Justice (another first), until her death in 2005 at the age of 84.

Full article and further reading:

<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/02/23/justice-black-woman-amazing-constance-baker-motley>

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/motley-constance-baker-1921-2005>

<https://www.biography.com/people/constance-baker-motley-9416520>

"Equal Justice Under the Law" (autobiography)

Shirley Chisholm (1924 – 2005)

"Unbought and Unbossed" – a slogan, mantra, way of life, a testament to her time in the halls of Congress. Her story is particularly important considering some of the folks who inhabit seats in Congress these days not to mention the oval office. She did not run for office to play the game or even necessarily follow the "rules" (which often times are not real rules but the way things have been done in the past). Her agenda was to try and do what was best for her constituency. Today her story, I believe, is of special impact considering the number of women who have decided to run for office. There are many places to find inspiration, and this is one.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 30, 1924, Chisholm was the oldest of four daughters born to immigrant parents Charles St. Hill, a factory worker from Guyana, and Ruby Seale St. Hill, a seamstress from Barbados. She graduated from Brooklyn Girls' High in 1942 and from Brooklyn College cum laude in 1946, where she won prizes on the debate team. Although professors encouraged her to consider a political career, she replied that she faced a "double handicap" as both black and female.

Initially, Chisholm worked as a nursery school teacher. In 1949, she married Conrad Q. Chisholm, a private investigator (they divorced in 1977). She earned a master's degree from Columbia University in early childhood education in 1951. By 1960, she was a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care. Ever aware of racial and gender inequality, she joined local chapters of the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, as well as the Democratic Party club in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

In 1964, Chisholm ran for and became the second African American in the New York State Legislature. After court-ordered redistricting created a new, heavily Democratic, district in her neighborhood, in 1968 Chisholm sought—and won—a seat in Congress. There, “Fighting Shirley” introduced more than 50 pieces of legislation and championed racial and gender equality, the plight of the poor, and ending the Vietnam War. She was a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971, and in 1977 became the first black woman and second woman ever to serve on the powerful House Rules Committee. That year she married Arthur Hardwick Jr., a New York State legislator.

Chisholm's freshman class included two African Americans of future prominence: Louis Stokes of Ohio and William L. (Bill) Clay, Sr., of Missouri—and boosted the number of African Americans in the House from six to nine, the largest total up to that time. Chisholm was the only new woman to enter Congress in 1969.

Chisholm's welcome in the House was not warm, due to her immediate outspokenness. "I have no intention of just sitting quietly and observing," she said. "I intend to focus attention on the nation's problems." She did just that, lashing out against the Vietnam War in her first floor speech on March 26, 1969. Chisholm vowed to vote against any defense appropriation bill "until the time comes when our values and priorities have been turned right-side up again." She was assigned to the Committee on Agriculture, a decision she appealed directly to House Speaker John McCormack of Massachusetts (bypassing Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, who oversaw Democratic committee appointments). McCormack told her to be a "good soldier," at which point Chisholm brought her complaint to the House Floor. She was reassigned to the Veterans' Affairs Committee which, though not one of her top choices, was more relevant to her district's makeup. "There are a lot more veterans in my district than trees," she quipped. From 1971 to 1977 she served on the Committee on Education and Labor, having won a place on that panel with the help of Hale Boggs of Louisiana, whom she had endorsed as Majority Leader. She also served on the Committee on Organization Study and Review (known as the Hansen Committee), whose recommended reforms for the selection of committee chairmen were adopted by the Democratic Caucus in 1971. From 1977 to 1981, Chisholm served as Secretary of the Democratic Caucus. She eventually left her Education Committee assignment to accept a seat on the Rules Committee in 1977, becoming the first black woman—and the second woman ever—to serve on that powerful panel. Chisholm also was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1971 and the Congressional Women's Caucus in 1977.

Chisholm declared her candidacy for the 1972 Democratic nomination for President, charging that none of the other candidates represented the interests of blacks and the inner-city poor. Discrimination followed Chisholm's quest for the 1972 Democratic Party presidential nomination. She was blocked from participating in televised primary debates, and after taking legal action, was permitted to make just one speech. Still, students, women, and minorities followed the “Chisholm Trail.” She entered 12 primaries and garnered 152 of the delegates' votes (10% of the total)—despite an under-financed campaign and contentiousness from the predominantly male Congressional Black Caucus. A 1974 Gallup Poll listed her as one of the top 10 most-admired women in America—ahead of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Coretta Scott King and tied with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for sixth place.

Chisholm retired from Congress in 1983. She taught at Mount Holyoke College and co-founded the National Political Congress of Black Women. In 1991 she moved to Florida, and later declined the nomination to become US Ambassador to Jamaica due to ill health. Of her legacy, Chisholm said, "I want to be remembered as a woman ... who dared to be a catalyst of change."

<http://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/shirley-chisholm>
<https://www.biography.com/people/shirley-chisholm-9247015>
[http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-\(C000371\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CHISHOLM,-Shirley-Anita-(C000371)/)

Quotes attributed to Shirley Chisholm:

"You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas."

"When morality comes up against profit, it is seldom that profit loses."

These next three quotes could have been written today:

"Congress seems drugged and inert most of the time... its idea of meeting a problem is to hold hearings or, in extreme cases, to appoint a commission."

"Health is a human right, not a privilege to be purchased."

"We have never seen health as a right. It has been conceived as a privilege, available only to those who can afford it. This is the real reason the American health care system is in such a scandalous state."

Barbara Charline Jordan (1936-1996)

My plan was to leave the political arena for a while and go with the arts. However, I felt compelled to do one more entry in this area. The following quote validated this decision: "But this is the great danger America faces. That we will cease to be one nation and become instead a collection of interest groups: city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual. Each seeking to satisfy private wants." The other point of validation is her speech before the house judiciary committee during the Watergate proceedings; that link is included below. If ever there was a time for the Legislative Branch to live up to its oversight responsibilities, that time is now.

Barbara Charline Jordan was born in Houston, Texas, on February 21, 1936, one of three daughters of Benjamin M. Jordan and Arlyne Patten Jordan. Benjamin Jordan, a graduate of Tuskegee Institute, worked in a local warehouse before becoming pastor of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, which his family had long attended. Arlyne Jordan was an accomplished public speaker. Barbara Jordan was educated in the Houston public schools and graduated from Phyllis Wheatley High School in 1952. Jordan was encouraged by her parents to strive for academic excellence. Her gift for language and building arguments was apparent in high school, where she was an award-winning debater and orator. She earned a B.A. from Texas Southern University in 1956 and a law degree from Boston University in 1959. That same year she was admitted to the Massachusetts and Texas bars, and she began to practice law in Houston

in 1960. To supplement her income (she worked temporarily out of her parents' home), Jordan was employed as an administrative assistant to a county judge.

Barbara Jordan's political turning point occurred when she worked on the John F. Kennedy presidential campaign in 1960. She eventually helped manage a highly organized get-out-the-vote program that served Houston's 40 African-American precincts. In 1962 and 1964, Jordan ran for the Texas house of representatives but lost both times, so in 1966 she ran for the Texas senate when court enforced redistricting created a constituency that consisted largely of minority voters. Jordan won, defeating a white liberal and becoming the first African-American state senator in the U.S. since 1883 as well as the first black woman ever elected to that body. She captured the attention of President Lyndon Johnson, who invited her to the White House for a preview of his 1967 civil rights message. The other 30 (male, white) senators received her coolly, but Jordan won them over as an effective legislator who pushed through bills establishing the state's first minimum wage law, antidiscrimination clauses in business contracts, and the Texas Fair Employment Practices Commission. On March 28, 1972, Jordan's peers elected her president pro tempore of the Texas senate, making her the first black woman in America to preside over a legislative body. In seconding the nomination, one of Jordan's male colleagues on the other side of the chamber stood, spread his arms open, and said, "What can I say? Black is beautiful." One of Jordan's responsibilities as president pro tempore was to serve as acting governor when the governor and lieutenant governor were out of the state. When Jordan filled that largely ceremonial role on June 10, 1972, she became the first black chief executive in the nation.

Advancing in her career, Jordan won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972. As a member of the House Judiciary Committee, she was thrust into the national spotlight during the Watergate scandal. Jordan stood as a moral compass during this time of crisis, calling for the impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon for his involvement in this illegal political enterprise. "I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution," she said in a nationally televised speech during the proceedings. Through her work, Jordan was a champion of civil rights as she worked tirelessly to create an inclusive society that valued and respected all of its citizens. Her style of oratory and clarity of vision on the issues made her potential as a presidential candidate a topic of conversation among liberals.

At the 1976 Democratic National Convention, Jordan once again captured the public's attention with her keynote address. She told the crowd, "My presence here . . . is one additional bit of evidence that the American dream need not forever be deferred." Jordan had reportedly hoped to secure the position of U.S. attorney general within Jimmy Carter's administration after he won the election, but Carter gave the post to someone else.

Announcing that she wouldn't seek reelection, Jordan finished up her final term in 1979. Some thought that she might have gone farther in her political career, but it was later revealed that Jordan had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis around this time. She took some time to reflect on her life and political career, penning, "*Barbara Jordan: A Self-Portrait*" (1979). Jordan soon turned her attention toward educating future generations of politicians and public officials, accepting a professorship at the University of Texas at Austin. She became the Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Chair of Public Policy in 1982.

While her educational work was the focus of her later years, Jordan never fully stepped away from public life. She served as a special counsel on ethics for Texas Governor Ann Richards in 1991. The following year, Jordan once again took the national stage to deliver a speech at the Democratic National Convention. Her health had declined by this point, and she had to give her address from her wheelchair. Still, Jordan spoke to rally her party with the same powerful and thoughtful style she had displayed 16 years earlier.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton appointed Jordan to head up the Commission on Immigration Reform. He also honored her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom that same year. She passed away two years later of pneumonia, on January 17, 1996, in Austin, Texas.

The nation mourned the loss of a great pioneer who shaped the political landscape with her dedication to the Constitution, her commitment to ethics and her impressive oratory skills. "There was simply something about her that made you proud to be a part of the country that produced her," said former Texas governor Ann Richards in remembrance of her colleague. President Clinton said, "Barbara always stirred our national conscience."

<https://www.biography.com/people/barbara-jordan-9357991>

<http://diversity.utexas.edu/barbarajordanstatue/history-of-barbara-jordan/>

<http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/16031>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1lkxXOQtVc> (house judiciary committee)

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937)

“The American obsession [with race] has driven me out of the country...while I cannot sing our national hymn, ‘land of liberty,’ etc., still deep down in my heart I love it and am sometimes sad that I cannot live where my heart is.”

There was an exhibit of Henry Ossawa Tanner’s artwork at the museum in San Francisco. I don’t usually do art galleries (I am not all that into art) but I made it a priority to see this exhibit. The two paintings of his I am most familiar with are “The Banjo Lesson” and “The Thankful Poor.” The second is the one with which I was most intrigued. I still remember sitting for a good while taking it in. For whatever reason it touched a place, at the time, I don’t think I could name. After reading about how these pieces of art came to be, I think I understand more fully why they had such a personal impact.

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born on June 21, 1859 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother, Sarah Miller, had been born into slavery in Virginia. His father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was third generation Pittsburgh native who had recently become a minister in the AME church. Pittsburgh was known for its proslavery groups (violent groups). Yet, the Tanner home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. In 1864 Henry’s family moved to Philadelphia where the AME church was headquartered and Reverend Tanner preached at its founding church, “Mother Bethel.”

At home and in church Henry heard the preachings of the great AME leaders. Their stories, challenges, faith, and pride in being black reassured and inspired Henry. Because his work kept him away from home, when he was home, Rev. Tanner and Henry would take long walks in Fairmont Park, a chance for father and son to get to know one another. It was on one of these walks that they watched an artist turn a white canvas into a beautiful scene. This was when

Henry decided that He must learn to paint. That night his mother gave him money for painting materials and he returned to the same place and made his first painting.

Henry loved painting and experimenting with the colors. Although not understood by his parents, they did support his desire to be an artist. Being in the United States he found it difficult to find artists who were willing to train him. So, he struggled on this own until his talent gained him entry into the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, then the finest art school in the United States.

The director of the academy, Thomas Eakins, believed in painting things as they really were rather than romantic notions of subjects. He took an interest in Tanner and Tanner adopted many of his methods. They remained friends for life. However, Tanner was not removed from the effects of racism, even at the academy. In one incident, a group of white students tied him to an easel, carried him out and left him in the middle of Broad Street. These incidents of cruel treatment and jokes lead him to quit the academy.

After eight years of trying to support himself, a prominent white couple – Bishop and Mrs. Joseph Hartzell of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Cincinnati became interested in his work. They arranged for Tanner to teach at Clark University in Atlanta, making him the first African-American painter to teach at a black college. The Hartzells also made it possible for him to study at the Académie Julien in Paris, France. He made many friends there and finally found a freedom that was lacking for him in the United States. His time there was cut short as he had to return to America to recuperate from typhoid fever. While he recovered he thought about the love and support his family gave him – and how they longed for his success.

It was this love and warmth that compelled Tanner to show this side of Black American life to white Americans – this love and warmth that was shown despite the abusive conditions many had to endure. He created two paintings that would later be hailed as the best of the Harlem Renaissance for their beauty and their realistic views of African-American life. Those two paintings – The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor were seen as powerful evidence against the claims that blacks were a lower form of human than whites.

The Banjo Lesson was accepted at the Paris Salon in 1894, a notable accomplishment. Tanner knew, though, that the judges of the Salon felt scenes of everyday life were genre paintings and not art of the highest rank. In their opinion, important art dealt with great historical events or classical themes. So, when Tanner returned to Paris, he returned to his roots – the Bible stories that had given him hope through all his difficulties.

He continued to experiment with light and color to lend emotion and power to his works. His painting, “Daniel and the Lion’s Den,” won much praise and an honorable mention in the Paris salon in 1896. His biblical scenes were extraordinary portrayals of the power and mystery of faith and miracles. Tanner’s painting; “The Rising of Lazarus” not only received a medal, it also received international acclaim and was purchased by the French government. The world now knew that an African American had won one of the highest honors in the art world – an honor that only a handful of American artists had achieved. Tanner’s paintings attracted crowds.

Though he was criticized for not returning to the United States to paint black life, nearly every black American artist who traveled to Europe visited him and was encouraged by him. Tanner continued to paint the scenes that had given him strength and courage all his life. His fame spread and the sales of his works grew dramatically. In 1924, the French government appointed

him a Chevalier (knight) of the Legion of Honor, the highest honor awarded to a civilian in France.

Though he tried to live again in the United States, prejudice forced him and his wife, Jessie Olssen, to go back to France. Tanner just could not bear to see his son scarred by the racism he knew only too well. Tanner died in his sleep on May 25, 1937 in his Paris apartment. Sometimes criticized for not painting more scenes of black life, Tanner's paintings portrayed the spiritual source of the strength of African Americans.

Full article found in:

“Extraordinary People of the Harlem Renaissance” by P. Stephen Harry and Sheila Jackson Hardy

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/henry-ossawa-tanner-4742>

<https://www.biography.com/people/henry-ossawa-tanner-9501966>

<https://smarthistory.org/tanner-banjo/> (the banjo lesson)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Thankful_Poor,_1894._Henry_Ossawa_Tanner.jpg (Thankful Poor)

Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915 – 1973)

Just as people of color were missing from so many of my favorite Scifi movies of the 50's and 60's the names of women are missing from the beginnings of rock and roll. While most of us may be aware of Chuck Berry and of course Elvis, Rosetta Tharpe is not as well-known but for the extent of her influence on those two performers and the bridge between gospel and rock and roll, her name should be at the top of the list.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was the first, great recording star of gospel music and among the first gospel musicians to appeal to rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll audiences, later being referred to as the “original soul sister” and “the godmother of rock and roll.” Blending gospel, blues and jazz, she was instrumental in moving gospel out of churches and into clubs and concert halls, single-handedly creating the concept of pop-gospel. Sister Rosetta Tharpe enjoyed a celebrity in the 1940s rarely attained by gospel musicians before or since. "She could play a guitar like nobody else you've ever seen," her friend Roxie Moore said. "People would flock to see her. Everybody loved her." Ira Tucker Jr., the son of the legendary gospel singer Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, put it simply: "She was a rock star."

Sister Rosetta was born Rosetta Nubin on March 20, 1915 in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, to Katie Bell Nubin. Katie was a mandolin playing traveling missionary and gospel shouter who was known as “Mother Bell” throughout the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) denomination. Rosetta was considered a child prodigy, learning to play guitar at the age of six. She toured with her mother in the Southeast, performing church standards such as “Jesus on the Mainline” at tent revival circuits where her mother performed. Her abilities on the guitar were amazing – she played individual tones, melodies, and riffs instead of just strumming chords, at a time when few African-American women played guitar. Billed as a "singing and guitar playing miracle," Rosetta Tharpe accompanied her mother in hybrid performances—part sermon, part gospel concert—before audiences all across the American South.

In the mid-1920s, Tharpe and her mother settled in Chicago, Illinois, where the duo continued to perform religious concerts at the COGIC church on 40th Street while occasionally traveling to

perform at church conventions throughout the country. As a result, Tharpe developed considerable fame as a musical prodigy, standing out in an era when prominent black female guitarists remained very rare; blues legend Memphis Minnie was the only such performer to enjoy national fame at the time.

In 1934, at the age of 19, Rosetta Tharpe married a COGIC preacher named Thomas Thorpe, who had accompanied her and her mother on many of their tours. Although the marriage only lasted a short time, she decided to incorporate a version of her first husband's surname into her stage name, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, which she would use for the rest of her career.

In 1938, Tharpe moved to New York City, where she signed with Decca Records. On October 31 of that year, she recorded four songs for Decca: "Rock Me," "That's All," "The Man and I" and "The Lonesome Road." The first gospel songs ever recorded for Decca, all four of these recordings became instant hits, establishing Tharpe as one of the nation's first commercially successful gospel singers.

On December 23, 1938, Tharpe performed in John Hammond's famous Spirituals to Swing Concert at Carnegie Hall. Her performance was controversial and revolutionary in several respects. Performing gospel music in front of secular audiences and alongside blues and jazz musicians was highly unusual, and within conservative religious circles the mere fact of a woman performing guitar music was frowned upon. Musically, Tharpe's unique guitar style blended melody-driven urban blues with traditional folk arrangements and incorporated a pulsating swing sound that is one of the first clear precursors of rock and roll. The performance shocked and awed the Carnegie Hall audience. Later Tharpe gained even more notoriety by performing regularly with jazz legend Cab Calloway at Harlem's famous Cotton Club.

During the early 1940s, Tharpe continued to bridge the worlds of religious gospel music with more secular sounds, producing music that defied easy classification. Accompanied by Lucky Millinder's orchestra, she recorded such secular hits as "Shout Sister Shout," "That's All" and "I Want a Tall Skinny Papa." "That's All" was the first record on which Tharpe played the electric guitar; this song would have an influence on such later players as Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Tharpe kept up a grueling tour schedule, performing her gospel music in churches as well as playing secular clubs. One highlight was a weeklong stint on stage at New York's famous Café Society before racially mixed crowds. Tharpe's considerable crossover appeal was demonstrated during World War II when she became one of only two African American gospel artists to be asked to record "V-Discs" (the "V" stood for "victory") for American troops overseas.

In the mid-1940s, Tharpe scored another musical breakthrough by teaming up with blues pianist Sammy Price to record music featuring an unprecedented combination of piano, guitar, and gospel singing. The duo's two most famous tracks, recorded in 1944, were "Strange Things Happening Every Day" and "Two Little Fishes and Five Loaves of Bread." However, in the face of intense criticism from the religious community, who viewed her jazzy collaborations with Price as the devil's music, Tharpe returned to recording more Christian music later in the 1940s. In 1947, she formed a duet with fellow gospel singer Marie Knight to record such overtly spiritual traditional gospel songs as "Oh When I Come to the End of My Journey," "Stretch Out" and "Up Above My Head (I Hear Music in the Air)."

In 1969 Rosetta was nominated for a Grammy for her recording of "Precious Memories." While on a European blues tour with Muddy Waters in 1970, Tharpe suddenly fell ill and returned to

the United States. She suffered a stroke shortly after her return and, due to complications from diabetes, had to have a leg amputated. Despite her health woes, Tharpe continued to perform regularly for several more years. She died on October 9, 1973 as a result of her second stroke. In 1998, the US Postal Service issued a Rosetta Tharpe postage stamp and in 2003 an all-star tribute CD "Shout, Sister, Shout" was released featuring Maria Muldaur and the Holmes Brothers. Tharpe's music and influence continue years after her death. Tharpe has been cited as an influence by numerous musicians, including Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Johnny Cash.

More than just popular, Tharpe was also groundbreaking, profoundly impacting American music history by pioneering the guitar technique that would eventually evolve into the rock and roll style played by Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and Eric Clapton. However, despite her great popularity and influence on music history, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was first and foremost a gospel musician who shared her spirituality with all those who listened to her music. Her epitaph reads, "She would sing until you cried and then she would sing until you danced for joy. She helped to keep the church alive and the saints rejoicing."

Read more:

<http://www.biography.com/people/sister-rosetta-tharpe-17172332>

"Shout, Sister Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe," by Gayle Wald.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnAQATKRBN0> (youtube video – "Didn't it Rain")

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3PNc_cWv9M (youtube video – "Trouble in Mind")