

Influential Figures from African-American History

(not a definitive list!)

Historical

Frederick Douglass
Harriet Tubman
Sojourner Truth
W.E.B. DuBois
Ida B. Wells
Josiah Henson
Madam C.J. Walker

Politics

Thurgood Marshall	first African-American justice on the Supreme Court
Ketanji Brown Jackson	first female African-American justice on the Supreme Court
John Lewis	leading civil rights figure and former member of Congress
Collin Powell	retired 4-Star general and former Secretary of State under George W. Bush
Charlene Mitchell	first African-American woman to run for president of the U.S.
Shirley Chisholm	first African-American woman elected to congress and first black candidate for President of the U.S. from a major political party
Jesse Jackson	civil rights leader and politician; former candidate for the Democratic nomination to be candidate for President
Barbara Jordan	Lawyer, educator, politician, and civil rights leader
Carol Moseley Braun	first African-American woman elected to the Senate; former candidate for the Democratic nomination to be candidate for President
Condoleezza Rice	Secretary of State under George W. Bush
Maxine Waters	Member of Congress
Cory Booker	Senator for New Jersey
Ayanna Pressley	Member of Congress
Cori Bush	Member of Congress
Stacey Abrams	politician and voting rights advocate
Jane Bolin	First African-American woman to serve as a judge in the U.S.
Charles Hamilton Houston	Prominent lawyer; worked to undo segregation laws in the U.S.

Civil Rights

Fannie Lou Hamer	voting rights advocate and civil rights leader
Ralph Abernathy	minister and civil rights activist, close friend of Dr. King, co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Coretta Scott King	wife of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., author, and activist
Bayard Rustin	prominent civil rights activist; credited with helping teach Martin Luther King Jr. about non-violence
Malcolm X	African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist

Rosa Parks	called “the first lady of civil rights” – refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white person
Angela Davis	scholar, author, and counterculture activist; worked closely with the Black Panther movement
Ruby Bridges	first black child to desegregate an all-white school in the state of Louisiana, aged 6
Audre Lorde	poet, feminist, and civil rights activist
Constance Baker Motley	civil rights lawyer, judge, state senator, and president of the borough of Manhattan
Ella Baker	worked alongside the first wave of mid-20 th century civil rights leaders and mentored the next generation
Daisy Bates	journalist and activist
Bruce Boynton	civil rights leader who inspired the Freedom Riders
Dorothy Pittman Hughes	feminist, activist, and author
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.	educator and historian
Huey Newton	co-founder of the Black Panther party
Stokely Carmichael	prominent civil rights activist, worked closely with the Black Panthers and the global Pan-African movement
Diane Nash	leader and strategist in the student wing of the civil rights movement
James Meredith	first African-American student to desegregate the all-white University of Mississippi
Louis Farrakhan	leader of the Nation of Islam
Medgar Evers	WWII veteran and civil rights leader
DeRay McKesson	modern day activist
Florynce Kennedy	activist and feminist

Culture

Toni Morrison	Nobel Prize-winning author
Alvin Ailey	choreographer and dancer
Billie Holiday	jazz singer
Paul Robeson	singer, actor, and political activist
James Baldwin	author and social critic
Maya Angelou	author, poet, dancer, and activist
Stevie Wonder	R&B singer and musician
Spike Lee	filmmaker
Miles Davis	jazz trumpeter and composer
Zora Neale Hurston	author and anthropologist
Leontyne Price	opera singer
Marion Anderson	opera singer
Jessye Norman	opera singer
Mahalia Jackson	gospel singer and civil rights activist
Sister Rosetta Tharpe	singer and guitarist who influenced early rock and roll
Langston Hughes	author, poet, playwright, and social activist
Eartha Kitt	jazz singer, dancer, actor, and activist

Thelonious Monk	jazz pianist and composer
Lena Horne	jazz singer and activist
John Coltrane	jazz saxophonist and activist
Sidney Poitier	first African-American actor to win an Oscar
Gwendolyn Brooks	author and poet; first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize
Harry Belafonte	singer, songwriter, and social activist
Chuck D	rapper
Quincy Jones	music producer
Duke Ellington	composer
Jacob Lawrence	painter
Augusta Savage	sculptor
Lorraine Hansberry	first African-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway
Octavia Butler	Science-fiction author
Faith Ringgold	artist known for narrative quilts
Ralph Ellison	author and critic
Isabel Wilkerson	Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist
Gwen Ifill	journalist, newscaster, and author; former co-anchor of the <i>NewsHour</i>
Oprah Winfrey	talk show host, actress, producer, philanthropist, and first black multi-billionaire
Cicely Tyson	actress
Josephine Baker	dancer, singer, actress, activist, and spy
Edna Lewis	chef
Kwame Brathwaite	photographer
Gordon Parks	photographer

Sports

Muhammed Ali	boxer
Jackie Robinson	first African-American to play in Major League baseball
Jesse Owens	4-time Olympic gold medalist for track and field
Arthur Ashe	tennis player – first African-American to win a Grand Slam title
Althea Gibson	tennis player and golf player - first African-American female to win a Grand Slam title
Michael Jordan	widely considered the greatest basketball player of all time
Hank Aaron	baseball player – held the MLB record for most career homeruns for 33 years
Deion Sanders	only man to play in both a Super bowl (football) and a World Series (baseball)
Lusia Harris	only woman ever drafted by the NBA (basketball)
Bo Jackson	all-star in both football and baseball
Jackie Joyner-Kersey	track and field star; voted Greatest Female Athlete of All Time by Sports Illustrated

Wilma Rudolph	track and field star; first African-American woman to win 3 gold medals in the Olympics in one year
Magic Johnson	basketball star
Serena Williams	tennis superstar
Venus Williams	tennis player and fashion designer, winner of 7 Grand Slam titles, advocate for equal pay for women in sports

Sciences

Benjamin Banneker	almanac author, astronomer, mathematician and author who constructed America's first functional clock
George Washington Carver	inventor and botanist
Mae Jemison	first African-American astronaut
Ronald McNair	astronaut and physicist
Mark E. Dean	computer engineer
Wanda M. Austin	aerospace engineer
Patricia Bath	ophthalmologist and inventor
Alice Augusta Ball	chemist
Georgiana Simpson	philologist and first African-American woman to receive a PhD
Neal deGrasse Tyson	astrophysicist and cosmologist
Katherine Johnson	physicist and mathematician
Mary Jackson	mathematician and aerospace engineer
Raye Montague	naval engineer