

African American Heroes

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Mary Ellen Pleasant

by ReadWorks

Have you heard of the Underground Railroad? The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad. Instead, it was a network of many routes and safe houses meant to help escaped slaves get to Canada or states in the northern United States, where slavery was illegal. Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American abolitionist, played a major role in the Underground Railroad. In the United States, abolitionists were people who wanted to end the practice of slavery throughout the country. It is thought that Mary and her husband, a wealthy abolitionist, helped with the Underground Railroad in the Boston area.

Sometime in the early 1850s, Mary moved to San Francisco, California. She lived there during a time called the Gold Rush. During that time, people came to California from all over to try to find gold and prosper. In San Francisco, Mary created many businesses, including restaurants.

Mary Ellen Pleasant became known as a very successful businesswoman. She used her influence to help African Americans. Many slaves escaping their owners would come to her for help. She created safe houses for them, basically helping to bring the Underground Railroad to the West Coast. She also used her status and money to support social justice campaigns and lawsuits.

People did not always respond well to Mary. Some people spread rumors about her. Even some local newspapers spread disrespectful articles about her and called her rude nicknames. But Mary did not let this stop her from helping African Americans in her local community. She used her money and influence to help people who came to her.

By the end of her life, Mary Ellen Pleasant lost a lot of her money and influence, but she is still remembered as a fighter for civil rights.



portrait of Mary Ellen Pleasant



illustration of Mary Ellen Pleasant

Alvin Ailey

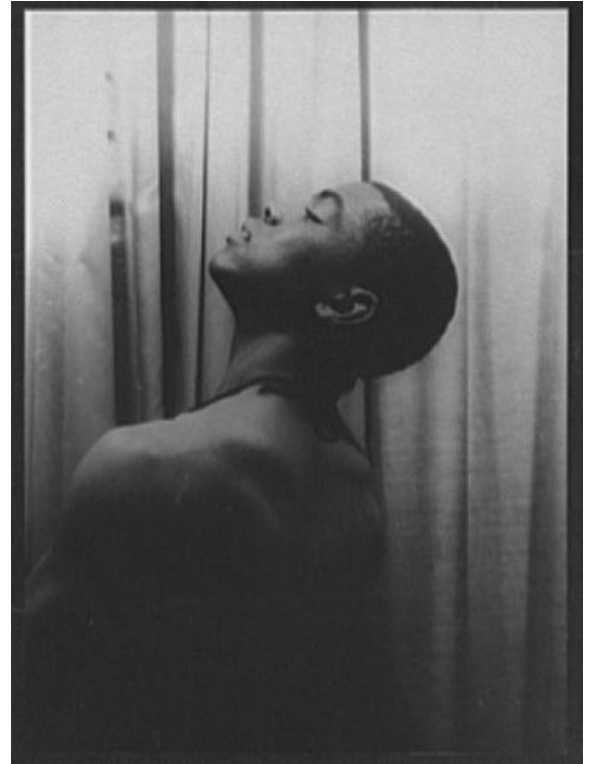
by ReadWorks

Alvin Ailey was an incredible dancer and choreographer. Alvin Ailey was an African American man who grew up in Texas. Every Sunday, he would go to church and listen to the hymns and songs. As he got older, he was inspired by the songs of his youth.

Ailey became interested in dance and art at an early age. He began learning all different styles of dance, including ballet, modern, jazz, and hip-hop. Ailey decided to use his experience to create his own dance company. He did not want to focus only on one style of dance. He decided to utilize a number of different styles!

In the late 1950s, after years of dancing across the country, Ailey formed his own dance company. At the time, it was made up of eight black dancers, though it later came to include dancers of all races. This was especially significant in a time when African Americans suffered discrimination and racism every day.

Alvin Ailey was never scared to make a statement. He was a choreographer *and* an activist. An activist is a person who works to bring about change in society. His dance pieces shed light on the African American experience in a new and interesting way. His most famous piece is called "Revelations." In this piece, dancers show the deep struggle and never-ending hope African Americans experienced throughout history. It uses gospel songs, blues songs, and sermons. People loved his unique style! Ailey spread his talent around the world by touring with his company.



Van Vechten, Carl, photographer. Portrait of Alvin Ailey. 1955. Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004662475/>.

portrait of Alvin Ailey from 1955

Ailey decided to help young dancers reach their dreams. He created his own school of dance. The school's program taught young dancers. The school also helped other schools that did not have art programs. Even today, members of Ailey's dance company visit schools to teach dance to many students.

Alvin Ailey's work is performed all over the world. Millions of people have seen his special style of choreography.



Knight Foundation (CC BY-SA 2.0)

This is a photograph of "Revelations" performed in 2011.

Daisy Bates and the Fight for Desegregation

by ReadWorks

Daisy Bates was born in 1914 in Arkansas. From a young age, she was aware of the racism that impacted her life and the lives of African Americans around her. She would grow up to do great things in the fight against racial inequality.

When she was a teenager, Daisy married a journalist. Together, they moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. There, they started their own newspaper. Their newspaper ran articles that championed civil rights. There was no other paper like it in Arkansas! Daisy also began working with local civil rights organizations. She even became the president of the Arkansas branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This famous organization fights to protect human rights and ensure equality for people of color.

In 1954, the Supreme Court passed a ruling that said segregated schools were unconstitutional. This meant that black and white students could no longer be forced to attend separate schools. Many schools in Arkansas and across the country did not follow the Supreme Court ruling. Some schools with white students still did not let black students in.

As many Arkansas schools pushed back against the Supreme Court ruling, the NAACP wanted to take action. Daisy helped by organizing nine black students to integrate into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The press called them the Little Rock Nine. Many white people came to the school and tried to stop the black students from entering. Daisy did her best to keep these students safe from violent crowds. She sometimes even drove them to school!



Cliff (CC BY 2.0)

statues of the Little Rock Nine

The reaction toward the Little Rock Nine made it clear that desegregation would be a long battle. Many people were very angry about the Supreme Court ruling. They did not believe black people and white people should be treated equally. People threatened to hurt Daisy because she spoke up. But she never stopped speaking out against injustices in her community.

After the integration of Central High School, Daisy Bates continued to work toward improving the lives of African Americans in the South. She won many awards for her civil rights work. Daisy died on November 4, 1999, but she continues to be honored. The third Monday of February is a state holiday in Arkansas. It is Daisy Gatson Bates Day.



Bledsoe, John T, photographer. Little Rock. Rally at state capitol. Arkansas Little Rock, 1959.

Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2009632339/>.

people protesting the desegregation of schools

Breaking Barriers in Space

by ReadWorks

Have you ever wanted to be an astronaut? Take some tips from the first African American person in space: Guion S. Bluford Jr.

Before Bluford was an astronaut, he was a pilot in the United States Air Force. He flew more than 140 missions during the Vietnam War. After years as a pilot, he went back to school and got a doctorate degree in aerospace engineering. Soon afterward, Bluford applied to be a part of NASA's astronaut training program. More than 10,000 people applied along with him. NASA chose Bluford and just 34 others to train to be astronauts. It was a very difficult program, but Bluford made it through. He was set to go up into space!

Guion S. Bluford Jr. boarded the *Challenger* in August, 1983. He was surprised to see so many people watching the spaceship launch. It was rainy, and the launch was set to happen around 1:00 am. Still, there were people outside watching. They wanted to see this historic moment. Once the spaceship launched, the crew listened to the astronauts' voices. They could hear someone laughing. Who was it? It was Bluford! He said, "I laughed and giggled all the way up. It was such a fun ride."

Once Bluford and the other astronauts got into space, they started doing experiments. One of the most important experiments was seeing how space affects the human body. This work would help future astronauts who would be in space for a much longer period of time.

Bluford flew into space three more times before deciding to stick to Earth for good. But his love of space travel continues to this day. Now, he talks to people across the country. He shares his stories about space and experimenting in a whole new environment.



NASA

Guion S. Bluford Jr.



NASA

Guion S. Bluford Jr. on the Challenger in 1983

Amelia Boynton Robinson

by ReadWorks

How did one woman help thousands of African American people vote? She used her intelligence and courage.

Amelia Boynton Robinson and her husband lived and worked in Selma, Alabama. They worked to help African American people in rural areas of Alabama. She promoted education and helped African American communities vote and participate in their government. This was hard work. Many state governments had passed laws and rules to prevent black people from voting. People would also use fear and threats to stop African Americans from voting. These people wanted to limit the power of black voices. Robinson wanted to change that. She went around to different states to help African Americans register to vote.

Amelia Boynton Robinson thought of another way to help the cause of ensuring voting rights for African Americans. She invited the prominent civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to her house in Selma to help promote the cause. Selma became an important focus for activists helping to register African American voters.

In 1965, a civil rights activist was killed by a state trooper during a peaceful protest. In response, Amelia and other civil rights activists planned to march from Selma to the state capital in protest. On the day of the march, almost 600 people started out from Selma. But state troopers stopped them soon after. They attacked the peaceful protestors in a brutal show of violence. Journalists took pictures and video of this attack. Many people around the country were shocked by the video and photographs. People called the ordeal "Bloody Sunday."

This protest and ones that followed it pressured politicians to make a change. Later in 1965,



Jamelle Bouie (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Amelia Boynton Robinson in 2012



Amelia Boynton Robinson meets President Barack Obama in March 2015

the president of the United States signed the Voting Rights Act. This law stated that no one should be stopped from voting based on their race. It aimed to end the practices that made it harder for African Americans to register to vote.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was not a perfect cure to discrimination in the South. Amelia Boynton Robinson would spend the rest of her life working for racial equality. She is still remembered today as an important pioneer for civil rights.

Caroline LeCount's Civil Disobedience

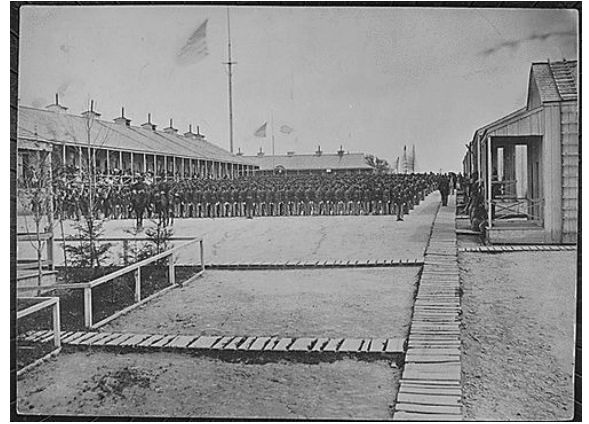
by ReadWorks

You may know about Rosa Parks, who famously refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white rider. But a woman named Caroline LeCount staged a protest on public transportation long before Rosa's time.

Caroline LeCount was born in 1846, over a century before Rosa Parks's protest. During the Civil War, Caroline LeCount lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She wanted to help the soldiers who were fighting close to her home. So she joined a women's group that helped in many ways.

Getting supplies to the soldiers' military bases was one way the women's group helped. The military bases were miles from the center of the city. It was hard for people to get there. The modern car had not been invented yet. Riding streetcars was one of the most convenient ways for people to get to the military bases. However, the streetcars were segregated. African Americans were not allowed to ride any streetcar they wanted. There were rules limiting which streetcars African Americans could ride. These rules made it especially difficult for Caroline and other African Americans who were trying to get to the troops.

LeCount and others spoke out against the segregation in streetcars. They also would try to ride the streetcars they weren't allowed to ride. They did this as an act of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is a peaceful form of protest. After many people protested the segregated streetcars, a law was passed that banned segregated streetcars in Pennsylvania. This meant that African Americans could now ride any streetcar.



This is a photo of African American soldiers at Camp William Penn, ten miles from the center of Philadelphia.



*U.S. National Park Service
an example of segregation*

Even after the new law was passed, a conductor still stopped LeCount from boarding a streetcar. She complained to a police officer, and the conductor was arrested. Her bravery helped enforce the new law. To enforce a law is to make sure everyone follows it.

After LeCount helped end segregation in streetcars, she continued to be a trailblazer in her community. A trailblazer is a leader who creates a path for others to follow. LeCount was also a teacher, and then she was the principal of a public school.

Who are some other trailblazers you know about?