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African-American Pioneers

by Liana Mahoney

You probably know the stories of many well-known African American leaders who left their mark on history, including Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges. You may be familiar with modern-day African American leaders, such as Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, and Barack

Obama. But there are many lesser-known African-American pioneers who have influenced art, literature, medicine, science, entertainment, sports, government, journalism, music, and education. Here are five African-American pioneers with whom you may not be very familiar, but who are deserving of a place in our history books:



1. Ella Baker

Ella Baker was the granddaughter of a former slave. Ella's passion for social justice and equality was fueled by stories her grandmother shared with her about slavery and inequality. She was a supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work, and helped King to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It was her work with young people, however, that had the most influence on civil rights. Baker taught young people that their voices were important in affecting change. She emphasized non-violent approaches to protesting inequality, and laid the framework for the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), an important organization that included mostly college-aged students. These students took part in the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s.

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They peacefully protested segregated transportation systems by riding together on buses with other activists in Alabama and Mississippi, often putting their lives at risks and facing angry mobs.

2. Thurgood Marshall

Known as "Mr. Civil Rights," Thurgood Marshall was the first black United States Supreme Court Justice, nominated to his post in 1967, at the height of the Civil Rights movement. He served on the Supreme Court for twenty-four years, during which time he was a relentless defender of constitutional rights, attacking inequality and racism through America's judicial system. He was able to get case after case overturned in favor of civil equality for African-Americans. Prior to serving as a justice, he was a very successful lawyer. One of his most famous cases is *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. The verdict in this famous case ended segregation in public schools.

3. Phyllis Wheatley

Often referred to as "the mother of Black literature" in America, Phyllis Wheatley was a poet who lived during the late 18th century. Kidnapped from her home in Africa and sold as a slave as a young child, Phyllis lived at a time when few women, and even fewer black people, wrote for publication. In most southern states in colonial America, it was illegal to teach a black person how to read and write. Yet the Wheatley family encouraged Phyllis to become literate, and by the age of 12, she was writing her own poetry. In 1773, she published her first book of poetry. Shortly after, the Wheatley family freed her. She was no longer a slave, but she used her success as a poet to speak out against the tyranny of slavery.

4. Dr. Charles Drew

Dr. Charles Drew was the first African-American to receive his doctorate degree

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from Columbia University in 1940. This, however, is not his most important achievement. Dr. Drew became a medical authority on blood transfusions and storage just as the world was entering World War II. His extensive research on blood led to new developments in the safe collection, storage, and transfusion of blood and the creation of successful blood banks. These blood banks greatly benefited American troops during the war, even though at this time in history, the U.S. military did not allow African-American blood to be given to white people. Dr. Drew also trained a generation of black doctors before he tragically passed away in a car accident in 1950. His work, however, lives on in that it continues to save lives today.

5. Shirley Chisholm

Shirley Chisholm became the first African-American congresswoman in 1968. She was a New York state legislator and a congresswoman who ran under the slogan "Unbought and Unbossed." She served seven terms until 1983, during which time she fought for better education, health services, and social services. In 1972, she attempted to further her political career by becoming the first black candidate to run for a major party's nomination for President of the United States. She also became the first woman to run for the Democratic Party's nomination. She was known as a fierce champion of the underprivileged, facing intense discrimination at the height of the Civil Rights movement because she was a woman and she was black. In the world of politics, Chisholm was a true pioneer, paving the way for future minorities to serve as government leaders.

Each of these African-American leaders was a pioneer, changing the world as we know it today. They all courageously faced adversity in one form or another, and used their talents, skills, and tenacity to overcome their obstacles to making positive changes. Although somewhat lesser-known, these African-American leaders have made a huge impact on culture and society, and have a rightful place in history.

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- 1) Which of these best describes the central theme of the passage?
- a) Explaining how each of these pioneers excelled in their fields and went abroad to obtain higher degrees to boost their careers
 - b) emphasizing how each of these pioneers overcame obstacles and adversities to bring about positive changes for the country and the world, and thus deserves recognition and a place in the history
 - c) sympathizing with these lesser-known African-American pioneers whose great efforts went in vain
 - d) drawing attention to the sufferings of African-American people in the country and the severity of discrimination and inequality they had to deal with

2) Match the personalities to the attributes that best describe them.

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|----------------------|---|
| a) Ella Baker | spoke out against slavery |
| b) Shirley Chisholm | researched to create blood banks |
| c) Phyllis Wheatley | attacked inequality through the judiciary |
| d) Charles Drew | educated young people about civil rights |
| e) Thurgood Marshall | fought for the underprivileged |

3) According to the writer, these pioneers deserve a rightful place in history. What reasons does the writer offer to substantiate this assertion?

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- 4) Sift through the passage to identify the rights that the African-Americans were denied.

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- 5) Each of these five African-American pioneers employed a different medium to fight for the same cause. Explain the statement briefly.

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3) According to the writer, these pioneers deserve a rightful place in history. What reasons does the writer offer to substantiate this assertion?

The writer rightfully opines that each of these African-American leaders was a pioneer, as they contributed in changing the world for the better in their own way. They all courageously faced adversity in one form or another, and used their talents, skills, and tenacity to overcome the obstacles and make positive changes. The writer further substantiates this assertion by saying that even though they were somewhat lesser-known, these African-American leaders have certainly made a huge impact on culture and

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society, and thus deserve a rightful place in history.

- 4) Sift through the passage to identify the rights that the African-Americans were denied.

Inequality, racism, discrimination and social injustice had been plaguing America for a long time. There was segregation in transportation systems, in public schools among many other sectors. It was illegal to teach a black person how to read and write. The U.S. military did not allow African-American blood to be given to white people. These underprivileged people were also deprived of good health or social services.

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5) Each of these five African-American pioneers employed a different medium to fight for the same cause. Explain the statement briefly.

The African-American leaders in the passage were pioneers in their own fields and championed the causes of social injustice and discrimination using their own media. Ella Baker used the voice of the youth to effect change and strengthen the civil rights movement. Thurgood Marshall attacked inequality and racism using America's judicial system. Phyllis Wheatley used her poems to speak out against the tyranny of slavery. Dr. Drew's research on blood transfusions and storage greatly benefited the American troops during the war as the African-Americans were not allowed to give blood to white people. Shirley Chishelm used her position and power of being a congresswoman to fight for the underprivileged.
