



# Introduction

**M**arginalization of blacks in history has meant neglect of their many outstanding achievements. Blacks have lived and accomplished wonderful things. All that was needed to know of their wonders was to examine their work, combine their accomplishments in a single volume, and then marvel over what they achieved within or beyond great adversities; hence, *Black Firsts* was born in 1994 and revised and greatly expanded in 2002.

Initially *Black Firsts*, an epic record of black achievement, aimed to give readers a capsule view of the history of blacks worldwide. It did that far more successfully than one could predict. It attracted slow readers and those who scarcely read at all; it had widespread appeal, drawing the attention of students, teachers, researchers, blue-collar workers, publishers, and others from a wide spectrum. Although preparation of the work was decidedly the most grueling research project that I have undertaken, it became one of the most rewarding due to its impact on the American public. New readers are still discovering the book, becoming inspired by its coverage, and using it as a starting point for projects they want to do on their own.

The first edition of *Black Firsts* broke virgin ground as a record in book form of significant achievements by blacks worldwide. With the assistance of two dedicated researchers, Robert L. Johns and the now deceased Casper L. Jordan, we told you that we cast our nets widely. Well aware that my publisher, Visible Ink, planned to publish a second edition nearly ten years later, before the first edition went to press I began to collect information for the next work. And as the years passed, my files grew larger and were filled with massive amounts of information that proved to be a godsend for the new work. I remained on alert for information to expand existing entries as well as to write new ones. Again I cast my net widely and this time I plowed deeply as well, and thus I have proof that

the celebration of those blacks who have been victorious is ongoing. The ground was firmly set; a new, revised, and greatly expanded *Black Firsts* would be published.

Having already established a workable procedure for researching black firsts, for this edition it was necessary to return to many of the same sources I used earlier, such as *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Black Enterprise* magazines to identify new firsts. Fortunately, however, there are a number of new and individual biographies, collections of biographies of people in a particular field, and other specialized works that advance the range of references available to document firsts.

Research for this revised edition produced interesting results. In addition to the expectation of finding record-breaking pioneers as award winners, record-setting sports figures, mayors of cities, and so on, there were firsts that opened new vistas for the interested reader and firsts that brought belated recognition to early achievers. For example, John Edward [Bruce Grit] Bruce became the first known black to write a black detective novel when he serialized *The Black Sleuth* in *McGirt's Magazine* between 1907 and 1909. For this fact to be meaningful, the reader of detective novels would need to know first of all that blacks did, in fact, write detective works; that Rudolph Fisher and Chester Himes were among the early writers; and that others followed in recent years, including Walter Moseley and Valerie Wilson Wesley.

While in the first book we noted our attempt “not to overlook firsts by women,” in this edition I have been deliberate in my attempt to search for firsts by women; thus, the number of entries on women is extensive. There are women firsts who serve or have served as mayors, such as Shirley Franklin of Atlanta; automobile dealers, such as Ellenae Henry Fairhurst of Huntsville, Alabama; winners of Oscars, such as Halle Berry; presidents of mainstream colleges, such as Ruth Simmons of Brown University; Pulitzer Prize winners, such as Suzan-Lori Parks for drama; Winter Olympics medalists, such as Vonetta Flowers; and the first woman president at a particular historically black college, such as Carolynn Reid-Wallace of Fisk University. There are military pioneers, federal administrators, federal judges, corporate executives, organization executives, and police chiefs. These are historic figures as well as modern-day achievers.

There were nearly three thousand firsts in the original edition, arranged within fifteen chapters, from Arts & Entertainment to Writers. This revised and greatly expanded edition includes nearly five thousand firsts in sixteen chapters; I have added a new chapter, Government: International, to account for many of the political accomplishments of blacks worldwide. Within these chapters, I retained many of the subject headings previously used and inserted new ones when appropriate. Some of the information

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found under one subject heading in the first edition has been rearranged and expanded in the second; for example, a medical school dean might have been first listed under Education but now has been moved to Science & Medicine. In working with subject headings, selections of terms can be arbitrary, although the idea is to group together similar events. When my choices are contrary to the reader's expectations, the reader should remember that the index is the best key to locating information on a particular person.

A caution for readers continues from the first volume. For inclusion in the book, all entries had to be documented, using several sources of information, when possible. Many sources gave conflicting information; at times it was clear that the information was simply incorrect, calling for a wider search to attempt to resolve the conflict. Readers, of course, are urged to notify the publisher or the writer when errors are found, when significant omissions are noticed, or when new firsts emerge after the book has gone to press.

The results of my inquiry into black firsts are no more than partially descriptive of black achievements. I wonder how many more barrier-breaking pioneers are out there in the universe but undocumented, or documented but undated, so that I could not include the record in this book. I remain both anxious and curious about the firsts that I missed. Despite the weariness that came from searches through vast amounts of material, I never found the appropriate stopping point. In the Sports chapter, for example, I wanted to see what else golfer Tiger Woods would do to expand his lists of firsts; or to determine what tennis greats Venus and Serena Williams would accomplish to change the course of history. Since these achievers are chronologically young, each is likely to continue to reach new heights, to change the curve in their sport, and to dominate the game until the rivals-in-waiting come on the scene with even more spectacular performances than we have seen with these sports greats.

On this matter, *USA Today* columnist Christine Brennan wrote a commentary on June 27, 2002, that, although geared to Woods and the Williamses, appropriately described the significant work of many other black firsts in this volume. Knowing that Woods and the Williamses dominate their sports, some would say that their performance "is bad for the game." But their performance is good for the appeal that their sports now bring to masses of people. As Brennan said, it is about "their brilliance and dedication on the field of play." We must, as Brennan said, appreciate "their greatness when it just happens to fall at our feet." Clearly their work promotes the sport and is not a detriment to it. Would we tell Woods and the Williamses to "dumb down" their games? Did anyone tell Picasso to paint poorly?

We will not tell black achievers who have accomplished so much—sometimes multiple firsts—to dumb down, to stop achieving, to perform

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poorly, to set fewer records or no records at all, to work toward failure, to keep history from happening, to interfere with the progress of a race. Our not-too-distant past was checkered with obstacles that did this for us, forcing many of us to swallow hard when our achievements were disregarded and when we were denied the glory of achieving. Now is the time to tell the good side of our story, to recognize those of the past who accomplished much, and to cheer on new pioneers of achievement.

*Jessie Carney Smith*

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