

# BLACK HISTORY

## Unusual Suspects: Little-known heroes of BH

TERRI DAY  
STAFF REPORTER

### SCOTT JOPLIN

Scott Joplin, also known as the King of Ragtime Music, might not be a name that is discussed around Black History Month. However, Joplin is one of the most famous and respected musician in American history, black or white.

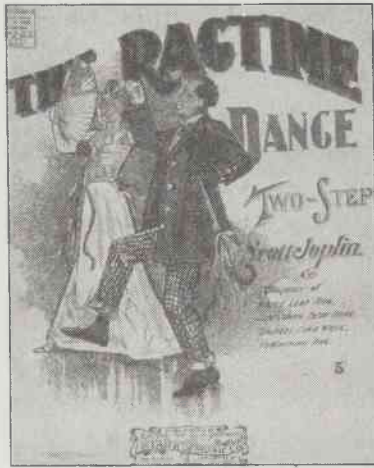
His ragtime compositions are known the world over. His hits, "The Entertainer" and "Maple Leaf Rag" might not be known by name, but their tunes are unmistakable.

In 1976, Joplin was even posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize for "contributions to American music". Joplin was born between 1867 and 1868 and was born in Texas, probably in the northeast part of the state. He was recognized for his musical talent early on, and as young as age 14 was playing and impressing people with his piano skills.

After studying at George R. Smith College, he made his way to the center of ragtime, St. Louis. Then, around 1891, he began playing the cornet, and joined several minstrel groups. In 1899, Joplin published the "Maple Leaf Rag", which would go on to become one of the most famous ragtime songs.

By 1909, about half-million copies had been sold, and they continued selling well for the next 20 years. He wrote "The Entertainer" in 1902, and today it is his most widely recognized song. The song was revived for the 1972 movie, "The Sting," however during the era in which the movie was set, ragtime and composers like Joplin were quickly losing popularity. At the time of his death in 1917, he was almost forgotten, but thanks to "The Sting," and a revival of the music of the ragtime age, Joplin will not be forgotten.

**Interesting Fact:** Scott Joplin's "Treemonisha" was an opera encompassing ragtime, and was rediscovered in 1972, with Katherine Dunham in the lead role, and Robert Shaw conducting. It was met with critical acclaim and has been performed all over the United States.



SCOTT JOPLIN

### F.E.W. HARPER

Frances Harper was a poet, novelist, and advocate who tried to convey the injustices of race and gender to people who might not normally hear it. Harper's books of poetry and novels call for the ending of inequalities, and a struggle for a better world. In writing her best known work, "Iola Leroy," she became one of the first female African-American novelists.

Harper, born in 1825, was the child of free parents who were both deceased by 1828. She then went to live with relatives and later worked for a Quaker family who gave her access to their library. She published her first book of poetry, "Forest Leaves," in 1845, which contained the well-known poem, "Bury Me in a Free Land." The last lines of Harper's poem plead with the reader: "I ask no monument, proud and high, / To arrest the gaze of the passers-by; / All that my yearning spirit craves, / Is bury me not in a land of slaves." Harper would read her poems at rallies for civil rights, as well as women's suffrage meetings. She was a well liked and respected speaker, and spent several years touring the country giving addresses.

Harper died on Feb. 22, 1911, nine years before women gained the right to vote. Her funeral service was held at the Unitarian Church on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. In recent decades, however, black women and feminists in general have resurrected Harper's legacy. In 1992, African-American Unitarian Universalists honored her and commemorated the 100th anniversary of Iola Leroy by installing a new headstone on her gravesite.

**Interesting Fact:** Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Junior High School in Davis, California was named for the author.

### RALPH BUNCHE

Ralph Bunche just might be more well known overseas than here, in his native country. However, Dr. Bunche's legacy of mediation and diplomacy certainly will not be forgotten in the UN,

where he did a body of work that helped change the world forever. Born in 1903, Dr. Bunche was raised by his grandmother who fostered in him a love of learning. He graduated at the top of his class in both high school and college at UCLA. He graduated with his masters' and then doctoral degree from Harvard, and was the first African-American at Harvard to receive a doctoral degree in political science.

Along with Eleanor Roosevelt, he helped write the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, which championed rights for all people, regardless of race, gender or class, all over the world. In 1949, after serving with the UN for several years, Dr. Bunche brokered a peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict that would earn him a Nobel Peace Prize, the first given to a person of color.

He continued working for the United Nations and finally, in 1968, he was appointed undersecretary general of the United Nations. During his time there he helped arbitrate conflicts in The Congo, Yemen, Kashmir, and Cyprus. Dr. Bunche died in 1971, after a lifetime of work, and diplomacy for the United States, and for the world. He once said, "May there be, in our time, at long last, a world at peace in which we, the people, may for once begin to make full use of the great good that is in us."

**Interesting Fact:** The Ralph Bunche Society on the Winston-Salem State campus is meant to further the dream of Dr. Bunche and also foster global thinking and discussion among students.



RALPH BUNCHE



TULSA RACE RIOTS

### THE TULSA RACE RIOTS

What started as a simple misunderstanding became one of the most destructive riots of the 21st century, but it goes largely unremembered by the general public.

Before the riots, the area that was the focus of the most anti-black sentiment was called Greenwood, also known as the "Black Wall-Street". There blacks enjoyed economic prosperity and in some cases, lived better than their white counterparts across town. There were quite a few whites who were unhappy that there were blacks who were making more money than they, and facing their own economic shortfalls, created a tension that was just waiting to burst.

It finally did on May 30, 1921, when a young black shoe shiner, while entering an elevator, tripped and grabbed a young white woman's arm for support. The young woman screamed, bringing a clerk from another store to the elevator. Accounts vary as to the extent of their contact, but almost everyone agrees it was innocent in every respect. The clerk had another opinion, however, and seeing the young black man exit the building hurriedly decided the woman must have been sexually assaulted. Police who looked into the matter seemed not to believe the clerk's assessment, but they searched for the young man and arrested him. That night, rumors began flying in the downtown area that the young man was to be lynched, and many whites began gathering at the courthouse to see if a lynching party had been formed. Newspaper reports of that

period state that an open touring car occupied by several black men drove up to the courthouse and a shot or two was fired. What followed was a day filled with gun fights, fires, and a possible air attack. Both sides took up arms; however, the blacks mostly to defend their homes. Angry whites stormed into Greenwood, destroying and burning as much as they could. Not all white Tulsans shared the views of the rioters. It is claimed that a few whites and Hispanics in neighborhoods adjacent to Greenwood took up arms in support of their black neighbors, but they too were grossly outnumbered.

Black families were forced to flee their homes. Homes that employed black servants were forced to turn over their workers or be the subject of assault. It's been estimated that over 5,000 whites poured into the Greenwood district looting, setting fires, and shooting indiscriminately at blacks. The Oklahoma National Guard arrived on June 1, and by declaring martial law ended most of the violence. In 1997 the Tulsa Race Riot commission was formed to investigate the events that some had tried to forget, and let history cover up. The commission confirmed many of the reports of the riots and even sought to set up reparations for survivors and family members.

**Interesting Fact:** During the 16 hours of rioting, more than 800 people were admitted to local hospitals with injuries, an estimated 10,000 were left homeless, 35 city blocks composed of 1,256 residences were destroyed by fire, and \$1.8 million (nearly \$21 million in 2007 dollars) in property damage.

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## Robert S. Abbott: Chicago's Defender

Jerrold Johnson  
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### CHICAGO

Robert Sengstacke Abbott was born in Frederica, Georgia, on Nov. 24, 1870 to Thomas and Flora Abbott. He moved with his family to Savannah, Georgia, in 1868 following his father's death. On July 26, 1874, Robert's mother married John Sengstacke, and his name became Robert Sengstacke Abbott.

Abbott worked since he was 8-years old, working in a grocery store and paying his mother 10 cents a week for room and board. Abbott studied the printing business at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) from 1892-1896, working as an apprentice at the "Savannah Echo" newspaper. While there, he befriended Hollis Burke Frissel, a white teacher who helped improve his social skills.

"I remember telling Robert, 'You should prepare yourself for the struggle ahead that in whatever field you should decide to dedicate your services, you should be able to point the light not only to your own people but to white people as well,'" Frissel recalled.

Abbott graduated from Chicago's Kent College of Law in 1897. The only African American in the class, he was unable to practice this profession due to racial discrimination. Abbott founded the newspaper The Chicago Defender on May 5, 1905. The first Defender headquarters was on 3159 State Street for 15 years, owned by Abbott's landlord Henrietta Lee; both Lee and her

daughter would help Abbott with the newspaper. Abbott ran The Chicago Defender virtually by himself, getting contributions from reporters and railroad workers sending him leftover printed material.

By 1920, the Defender was reaching 230,000 people in and out of Chicago. In 1921, he would begin printing his paper at 3435 Indiana Avenue. As Abbott grew in wealth, The Chicago Defender included stories on racial conflict and other topics such as blacks outside the United States. Eventually, the Chicago Defender became the country's most widely circulated black newspaper, making Abbott a self-made millionaire in the process. Some of his awards include honorary degrees from Wilberforce University and Morris Brown University.

Abbott married Helen Thornton Morrison on Sept. 10, 1919, divorced her in 1933, and married Edna Denison in 1934. Although neither wife said she loved him, Abbott had 100 close relatives, training his nephew, John Herman Henry Sengstacke to head the Defender.

Robert Sengstacke Abbott's funeral took place at Metropolitan Community Church, and his remains were interred in the Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago. The Chicago Defender, in accordance to his will, was left in the control of his nephew John Henry Sengstacke. His home, the Robert S. Abbott House, has been designated a national historic landmark.

Robert Abbott, 70, died from Bright's disease on Feb. 29, 1940.