

Martin Luther King, Jr.

1851: Jordan House Museum
1868: Alexander Clark, Sr.
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1907: Dr. E.A. Carter
1915: NAACP
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February is Black History Month

February is home to Black History Month. Voting rights history is Black history, and we encourage you to educate your communities and reflect on the contributions of Black innovators and activists who power our democracy.

Given the current political climate, it seems appropriate to give a reminder of **Dr. Martin Luther King's six steps** to nonviolent social change, beginning with gathering information.

Here are the six principles:

- Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.
- Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding.
- Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people.
- Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform.
- Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate.
- Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.



1851

Jordan House Museum can now be explored via a [free virtual 3-D tour](#).

The house was built by abolitionist James C. Jordan about 175 years ago and was a stopover for the Underground Railroad.

James C. Jordan was born in 1813 in West Virginia, in a community where slavery was ingrained in society and culture. Jordan was expected to assist neighbors in their hunt for escaped slaves, and these experiences developed his abolitionist beliefs and zeal.

During the antebellum period, the Jordan House was a stop on the Underground Railroad

and Jordan was regarded as the “Chief Conductor” for Polk County.

The History of Polk County, published in 1880, says “Jordan has been a life-long enemy of slavery; his devotion to the political life as a staunch and stalwart Republican is the outgrowth of deep-seated conviction; it is among the pleasant things to remember, that under his protecting roof -John Brown and his associates, with more than a score of recently liberated slaves, have offered their prayers and sung their first jubilee hymns on their way to Canada...”

[West Des Moines Historical Society](#) has owned and operated it as a museum for decades. **Stop by:** [Guided tours](#) are available for \$5 with a reserved ticket, 11am and 1:30pm on Fridays and Sundays. 2001 Fuller Road, WDM. Jordan House tours will require a ticket purchase in advance.



1868

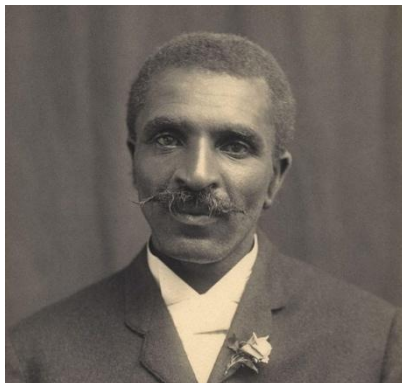
Clark v. The Board of Directors: Iowa integrates schools 86 years before Brown v. Board of Education.

Alexander Clark Sr., who helped African American men earn voting rights in 1868, did his best to give his children a better life. A year earlier, his 12-year-old daughter, Susan Clark, was denied admission into her neighborhood school in Muscatine because of her race.

On his daughter's behalf for her right to attend, Clark sued the Muscatine Board of Directors, explained Leo Landis, curator at the State Historical Society of Iowa.

The case went to the Iowa Supreme Court, which held in 1868 that segregated schools were inherently unequal because "the law makes no distinction as to the right of children ... to attend the common schools."

[The decision led to the integration of Iowa schools](#) — 86 years before Brown v. Board of Education, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.



1891

[George Washington Carver](#) was the first black student at Iowa State University. He received his Master's degree in 1896. Carver was the first African American faculty member at Iowa State. His work at the experiment station in plant [pathology](#) and [mycology](#) first gained him national recognition and respect as a botanist.

In 1896, Carver accepted a job at Tuskegee Institute to head its Agriculture Department and taught there for 47 years. He was an American agricultural scientist and inventor who promoted peanuts and other alternative crops to cotton and methods to prevent soil depletion. He was one of the most prominent black scientists of the

early 20th century. American Presidents sought his counsel, he was friends with Henry A. Wallace and political leaders from countries around the world wanted to meet with him.

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1907

Dr. E.A. Carter was the first African American to graduate from the University of Iowa Medical College in 1907.

[according to the African-American Museum of Iowa.](#)

Carter practiced medicine in Buxton, a long-lost coal-mining town in southeast Iowa that has family ties to **[U.S. Sen. Cory Booker.](#)**

[Kameron Middlebrooks](#), the great-great nephew of Carter, began to learn more about his great-great uncle's legacy when he became involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"I found out he was my great-great-uncle when I was 3 or 4 years old," Middlebrooks said. "His parents were enslaved, but he still wanted to pursue his education. Carter waited tables to get himself through undergrad and medical school," the Des Moines NAACP president added.

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1915

NAACP comes to Iowa.

Iowa's first NAACP branch was established in Des Moines in 1915.

The Des Moines chapter started with 35 members and increased to 200 within the first year, according to "Outside In African American History in Iowa."

Robert Wright Sr. was an attorney who led the chapter.

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1918

Gertrude E. Rush becomes first Black female lawyer admitted to the Iowa bar.

[Gertrude E. Rush](#) earned her law degree from Des Moines University in 1914. Her husband, James B. Rush, who was an attorney, tutored her.

"Outside In African American History in Iowa" reported that Rush was admitted to the Iowa bar in 1918, making her the first African American female lawyer in Iowa.

Since Black lawyers were denied admission to the American Bar Association, Rush helped establish the Negro Bar Association, now called the National Bar Association, in 1925.

Gertrude also composed the charming and treasured song “Jesus Loved the Little Children”.

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1930

Gwendolyn Wilson Fowler became the first black woman to obtain a pharmaceutical Degree and to be officially registered as a pharmacist in the state of Iowa.

She also became the first African American woman from Iowa to serve in the United States Foreign Service, when she was posted to Vietnam in the 1950's. She was inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1987.

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1946

Harriette Curley was hired as the **first African American teacher in the Des Moines Public Schools system in 1946**. Curley taught kindergarten at Perkins Elementary School.

Protesters at the time petitioned the board not to hire Curley. But as Superintendent N.D. McCombs noted:

"She topped the list of applicants by a wide margin. The board has had a policy, in writing, for years that all boys and girls get the best teachers for the money we can pay. And they are not hired on a basis of color, creed, or national creed."

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1948

Edna Griffin launches picket campaign after being denied at Katz Drug Store's soda fountain.

On July 7, 1948, John Bibbs, [Edna Griffin](#), and Leonard Hudson went to the Katz Drug Store to drink from the soda fountain but were denied service.

"I cater to a large volume of White trade, and don't have the proper equipment to serve you," said Maurice Katz, the store's general manager.

Bibbs, Hudson, and Griffin, all members of the Progressive Party of Iowa, picketed the store with fellow party members every Saturday for two months following the incident.

During the criminal appeal with the Iowa Supreme Court, Griffin filed a civil suit in Polk County District Court for \$10,000 in damages. In October 1949, an all-White jury awarded Griffin \$1, which her attorney deemed a victory.

Bibbs and Hudson also went on to bring civil suits against the store, "Outside in African

American History in Iowa," said.

Protests and lawsuits piled up against the drug store and its manager. On Dec. 2, 1949, days before the Iowa Supreme Court's decision in *State of Iowa v. Katz*, the business surrendered.

Eight civil suits and six pending criminal charges were ultimately dismissed and a \$1,000 settlement was paid to the plaintiffs.

The building was renamed in 1998 [to honor Griffin](#).

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1951

Barbara Rose Johns

In **1951**, a Black teenager led a walkout of her segregated Virginia high school. Her statue replaced that of a Confederate general in the U.S. Capitol.

Barbara Rose Johns was 16 when she mobilized hundreds of students to walk out of Farmville's Robert Russa Moton High School to protest its overcrowded conditions and inferior facilities compared to those of the town's white high school.

That fight was taken up by the NAACP and eventually became one of the five cases that the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed in *Brown v. Board of Education*, whose landmark 1954 ruling declared school segregation unconstitutional.

"Before the sit-ins in Greensboro, before the Montgomery bus boycott, there was the student strike here in 1951, led by

Barbara Johns," Cameron Patterson [told NPR in 2020](#), when he led the [Robert Russa Moton Museum](#) located on the former school grounds.

Johns' bronze statue is the latest addition to Emancipation Hall, a gathering place in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center that houses many of the 100 statues representing each state.

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1959

Luther T. Glanton is credited with being the **first African-American law student** at Drake University, where he earned his law degree in 1942. Glanton became **Iowa's first Black judge** after winning the Des Moines municipal court election in 1959.

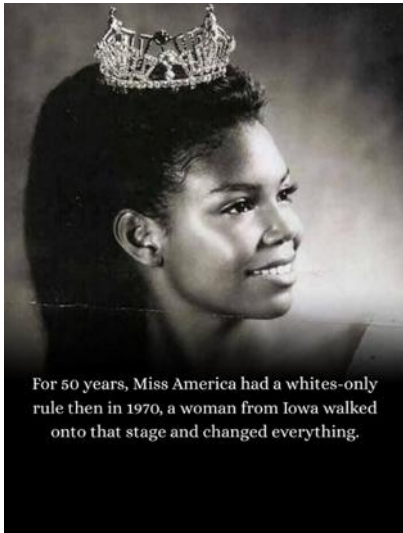
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1960

Simon Estes, an internationally acclaimed bass baritone, was the star of the stage at the world's major opera houses, a regular guest at international festivals and has appeared with leading international orchestras under eminent conductors.

Rising from humble beginnings in the small town of Center-ville, Iowa, this grandson of a slave sold at auction for \$500, son of a father who faithfully provided for his family with menial jobs from coal mining to serving as a hotel porter, is an amazing success story.



For 50 years, Miss America had a whites-only rule then in 1970, a woman from Iowa walked onto that stage and changed everything.

1970

[New York native Cheryl Browne](#), who attended Luther College in Decorah, took home the Miss Iowa title in 1970 and became the **first Black woman to compete in the Miss America pageant**.

A [New York Times article](#) called her “Miss Iowa, the black girl from Queens”.

The Miss America pageant began in 1921 in Atlantic City. From the beginning, it had an explicit rule written into its bylaws: contestants must be "of good health and of the white race." For decades, this wasn't implied. It wasn't informal.

It was written policy. In 1950, the pageant quietly removed the racist language from its bylaws.

The civil rights movement was beginning. Explicit racial restrictions were becoming legally and socially incontestable. But removing the words didn't remove the barrier. For twenty years after the rule was officially gone not a single Black woman competed in Miss America. State pageants simply didn't select Black women. The door was technically open, but nobody was walking through it. Then came Cheryl Browne.



1978

Elaine Rose Graham Estes was the **Des Moines Public Library director** and the **first African American to have that title**.

Her attempt to live in the then-unintegrated Drake University dormitories led to her and two others being credited for integrating the dormitories. Estes received multiple honors, including a Distinguished Alumni Award and appearing in a documentary.



1996

Judge Luther T. Glanton's wife, [Willie Stevenson Glanton](#), became Iowa's **first Black female legislator** representing Polk County.

In 1996, Glanton was inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame.



2019

A native of Waterloo, Hannah-Jones is the creator of the [1619 Project](#) and a leading voice on racial equity and American history. The 1619 Project was initially published in **August 2019** as a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. It was later expanded into a book, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, which was published **Nov 2021**.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and educator **Nikole Hannah-Jones** received the **George Washington Carver Medal** for the 2025–2026 academic year by Simpson College. The honor recognizes individuals whose achievements reflect

Carver's legacy of curiosity, courage, service and humanity.

She currently serves as the Knight chair in race and journalism at Howard University and founded the Center for Journalism & Democracy.

Visit <https://nikolehannahjones.com/about/> to view her awards and honors, the boards she is a member of and fellowships she's received.

You can learn more about African American history in Iowa by visiting the African American Museum of Iowa in Cedar Rapids or by reading the ["Outside In African American History in Iowa 1838-2000."](#)