

The forgotten heroes of Black History

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Contributor

When people are asked to name a black historical figure, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Harriet Tubman are all common responses. Though these people have all made tremendous contributions to our world, they are only a small fraction of those who deserve recognition. Sadly, many of these figures go unnoticed, and are less recognizable as a result. Here is just a small selection of the unsung heroes of black history.

Benjamin "Pap" Singleton was born into slavery in Tennessee in 1809. He escaped to the north in 1846 and became an activist for the abolitionist movement. He later returned to Tennessee while it was controlled by the Union, but then left again, concluding that blacks could not reach true equality and freedom in the southern states. After the Civil War, Singleton worked to establish African-American settlements in Kansas. He also promoted Black-owned businesses in Kansas and was interested in the Back to Africa Movement.

Robert Smalls was born into slavery in 1839, but was not a slave for his whole life. During the Civil War, he led an uprising aboard a Confederate transport ship, eventually

sailing the ship north to freedom. This accomplishment led President Abraham Lincoln to allow African-American soldiers to serve in the Union Army. After the war, Smalls served as a politician, notably writing legislation that gave South Carolina its first free public education system.

Though Rosa Parks' bus protest is widely taught, few know that another woman actually had a similar experience just nine months earlier. On March 2, 1955, 15-year-old **Claudette Colvin** was arrested and escorted off of a Montgomery bus for sitting in the whites-only section. She was booked at the local jail for having defied Montgomery bus segregation laws. This chain of events ultimately provided influence for the actions of Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Colvin is currently 77 years old and lives in New York City.

Born a slave in 1862, **Ida B. Wells** later became free and established herself as a controversial journalist. Throughout her career, Wells reported on the lynching of black people as a manifestation of the white panic that arose after emancipation. Similar to both Rosa Parks and Colvin, Wells also caused a stir when she refused to give up her seat on a Memphis train. She police then arrested and escorted her off the train while she kicked and screamed in protest. She later sued the railroad company with the help of a black attorney and won her case.

Bayard Rustin, born in 1912, served as a leader for the civil rights movement. He was part of the Freedom Riders, organized the March on Washington and New York City School Boycott, and was friends with Dr. King. He was arrested in 1953 for being a homosexual, but was later released and became a champion for gay rights in the 1980s. He believed that gay people were in need of similar social improvements that black people were in need of in the 1950s.

All of these people, and many others, have made great contributions to our world and inspired major change. Despite their accomplishments, they are rarely recognized. When asked how many black historical figures on this list she had heard of, University student Malina Persaud admitted, "I don't know a lot of people when it comes to that," reflecting the sentiment of much of the general public. Persaud blamed the over-advertisement of Black History Month for people's ignorance on the topic. "I feel like it's advertised enough, but a lot of people don't pay attention to it. It's advertised on TV, on social media, everywhere," she said. She believes that the month's pronounced media presence desensitizes the public to the actual history behind it. Nevertheless, learning these stories makes people more informed on our nation's past and gives them hope for change to come in the future.

