Historical Context
Black History Month first began as Negro History Week and was launched in 1926 by historian Carter G. Woodson, one of the first African Americans to earn a doctorate from Harvard University. Woodson timed the week to coincide with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln. In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford officially recognized Black History Month and called for the public to recognize the history, accomplishments and contributions of African Americans throughout the country’s history.*

In the News
National
The 2018 midterm elections brought in 56 black members of the U.S. House of Representatives, the largest class in history. This includes more than 20 black women, the most that have ever served at once. Illinois, Massachusetts, and Connecticut all elected their first black woman congressperson.

Nashville
Nashville native Martesha L. Johnson was elected the Nashville Metropolitan Public Defender in 2018. Johnson is the first African American to be elected to this position in the city's history.

Vanderbilt
In 2018, the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center opened up a new undergraduate study lounge featuring the legacy pioneer portraits and a display of news articles about black history at Vanderbilt. The center also opened the renovated legacy lounge, which has more than 500 facts on display related to black history at Vanderbilt.

Vanderbilt University's first African American vice chancellor and first African American athletics director David Williams II died in February 2019, eight days after stepping down from his position. The Recreation and Wellness Center was recently renamed in his honor.

Recent Initiatives
Vanderbilt Trailblazers Project
In October 2018, Vanderbilt unveiled the portraits of four trailblazing black alumni in Kirkland Hall. Trailblazers recognized include Perry Wallace, the first black varsity basketball player in the SEC; the Rev. Walter R. Murray Jr., founder of the Association of Vanderbilt Black Alumni; the Rev. James Lawson, a prominent leader in the civil rights movement; and Bishop Joseph Johnson, the first black undergraduate student at Vanderbilt. These portraits, which were painted by world-renowned artist Simmie Knox, will remain in Kirkland Hall until fall 2019 and then be moved to their permanent homes across campus.

Dorothy Phillips Chancellor’s Faculty Fellowships
Vanderbilt recognized Dorothy Phillips, BA’67, the first African American woman to receive an undergraduate degree from Vanderbilt, by creating two fellowships for midcareer STEM faculty in her honor in 2017. Named the Dorothy J. Wingfield Phillips Chancellor’s Faculty Fellowships, the awards recognize leadership in diversity in STEM fields.

Triumph: The Untold Story of Perry Wallace
With Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos as one of its executive producers, Vanderbilt commissioned a film about Perry Wallace which debuted in 2017. The film, Triumph: The Untold Story of Perry Wallace, is narrated by Academy Award-winning actor Forest Whitaker and was featured at the 2018 Nashville Film Festival.


Photos Courtesy of Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archives; (L to r) Conra Gandy Collier, the Rev. James Lawson, Dianne White Bernstein, Perry Wallace, Bishop Joseph A. Johnson Jr.

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Celebrating Black History

RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Vanderbilt
Campus Centers and Departments
• Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center
• African American and Diaspora Studies

Student Organizations (graduate and professional)
• Organization of Black Graduate and Professional Students
• Peabody Coalition of Black Graduates
• Vanderbilt Black Seminarians
• Black Law Students Association
• Owen Black Students Association
• National Society of Black Engineers
• National Black MBA Association
• Serving, Helping, Affirming the Divinity in Every Sista’ (SHADES)

Student Organizations (undergraduate)
• Vanderbilt Undergraduate Chapter of National Black Law Student Association

Student Organizations (undergraduate, graduate and professional)
• African Student Union
• Black Student Association
• Caribbean Student Association
• Nilaja Amari Dance Troupe
• Students Transitioning Relaxed and Natural Developing Sisterhood (STRANDS)
• Vanderbilt BlackOut Affinity Group
• National Society of Black Engineers
• Black Girls Lift
• Quest to Unify and Empower an Empire of Nubian Sistas (QUEENS)
• Revitalizing and Empowering Vanderbilt’s African American Male Population (REVAMP)
• Sankofa: Fellows in African American and Diaspora Studies

Greek Life
• Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (Kappa Theta Chapter)
• Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (Eta Beta Chapter)
• Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (Mu Rho Chapter)
• Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (Theta Beta Chapter)
• Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (Nu Rho Chapter)
• Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (Alpha Gamma Alpha Chapter)
• Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (Omega Pi Chapter)

Nashville
• 100 Black Men
• Nashville Black Chamber of Commerce
• Nashville Black Professionals
• Nashville Black Pride
• Metro Nashville Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women
• Nashville Association of Black Journalists
• Black Lives Matter
• African American Cultural Alliance
• NAACP Nashville
• Tennessee State Museum
• Civil Rights Room, Nashville Library Downtown Branch

For more information on Black History Month, visit the Association for the Study of African American Life and History website.

For more information or to provide feedback, contact Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at edi@vanderbilt.edu. For information on the university’s policy on religious holy days and observances, contact Human Resources at human.resources@vanderbilt.edu.