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Texas Black History and Culture Highlights

October 2024



October 2, 1987, Houston Tillson alum and first female African-American doctor to serve Stamford, Connecticut, Ursula Joyce Yerwood, died in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, at age 78. Dr. Yerwood was a family doctor and southeastern Connecticut's first black woman physician. Yerwood was born in Victoria, Texas, in 1909 to a father who was a physician, one of fewer than twenty African American physicians in Texas. Yerwood and her older sister, Connie studied medicine at Meharry Medical College, in Nashville, Tennessee, where they were the only two female students in their first year. Upon graduating at the top of her class in 1933, she married Dr. Joseph Carwin in 1936. The couple moved to Stamford, Connecticut where Yerwood advocated for social justice causes promoting educational and cultural opportunities for African American youth. In 1943, she founded a community center named after Yerwood in 1975. Throughout her career, she delivered over 2,000 babies. She retired in 1981. More about Ursula Yerwood can be read [here](#).

October 4, 1937, Houston's first African American mayor, Lee Patrick Brown, was born in Wewoka, Oklahoma. Before leading the city of Houston, Mayor Brown was Houston's first African American police chief from 1982 to 1990. Brown began his law enforcement career while earning degrees in criminology and sociology at San Jose State University. He earned a master's and then a doctorate in criminology from the University of California-Berkeley. In 1974, Brown was named Sheriff of Multnomah County, Oregon, and in 1976, director of the Department of Justice Services. As public safety commissioner of Atlanta, Georgia, from 1978 to 1982, Brown cracked the Atlanta Child Murders case. After serving as Houston's Chief of Police from 1990 to 1992, he was the police commissioner of New York City. President Clinton appointed Brown to serve in his cabinet from 1993 to 1996. After teaching courses at Texas Southern University and Rice University, Brown was elected mayor of Houston, Texas, in 1998. He served three two-year terms. More about Mayor Lee P. Brown can be read [here](#).



October 5, 1972, Professional basketball executive and former player Grant Hill was born in Dallas, Texas. Hill played for the Detroit Pistons and represented the United States in the 1996 Summer Olympics. Hill attended Duke University, where he helped his school win the NCAA basketball championship in 1991 and 1992. Hill was drafted by the Detroit Pistons in 1994. In 2000, Hill left the Pistons for the Orlando Magic. During that time, he was an NBA All-Star. Hill joined the Phoenix Suns in 2007. After five seasons with Phoenix, the 2012–13 season was his last. Hill is a noted collector of African American art, and his collection has been exhibited across the U.S. Since 2015, Hill has been a co-owner of the Atlanta Hawks and vice chairman of the team's board. In 2023, he and his wife, singer Tamia, became part owners of Orlando City SC in Major League Soccer and the Orlando Pride in the National Women's Soccer League. More about Grant Hill can be read [here](#).

October 7, 1868, Educator, Maude A. B. Fuller was born in Lockhart, Texas. Fuller was the founder and the editor of the *Woman's Helper*, a national newspaper. She served for 41 years as the National Baptist Convention's Women's Auxiliary president. Fuller attended Tillotson College and Guadalupe College. She taught in various public schools in Seguin and other Texas cities for twenty-five years. As an advocate for young people, Fuller was an officer in various National Baptist Convention organizations. She wrote several handbooks for youth groups, church societies, and home and foreign missionary societies. She achieved national prominence as a speaker and youth organizer. In 1944, Fuller led a successful fundraising campaign to build a mission in Liberia and educate young men and women from countries ranging from Panama to Liberia. She and her husband owned a funerary business. Fuller belonged to various service organizations and received many awards, including a doctor of humanities degree awarded to her by the Union Baptist Theological Seminary in Houston. More about Maude Fuller can be read [here](#)



October 11, 1912, Henrietta Bell Wells, the first female debate team member at Wiley College, was born in Henrietta Pauline Bell in Houston, Texas. Bell graduated valedictorian from Houston's Phillis Wheatley High School in 1929 and Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. Her freshman English professor poet, Melvin Tolson, encouraged her to try out for the debate team he coached. As a freshman in 1930, Bell and her teammates participated in the first interracial collegiate debate in the United States against law students from the University of Michigan. The debate was a non-decision discussion. Bell and her team from the Historically Black College went on to participate in additionally unconventional interracial debates with students from the University of Oklahoma City in Oklahoma City, then against Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. Upon graduating from Wiley College, Bell returned to Houston, met and married musician Wallace Wells. The couple moved to Gary, Indiana, where she worked as a social worker, then educator, and later an Episcopalian minister. More about Henrietta Bell Wells can be read [here](#).

October 15, 1912, World Heavyweight Champion and Galveston native Jack Johnson was charged with violating the Mann Act. The Mann Act, passed in 1910, was aimed at preventing prostitution or transporting women across state lines for "immoral purposes." The Mann Act criminalized sexual activity between consenting adults for premarital sex and extramarital affairs. It was invoked to outlaw interracial relationships. Though engaged to Lucille Cameron, a white woman who refused to cooperate in convicting her fiancée, a case was mounting via the FBI to convict Johnson for his relationships with non-black women. Additional women were pursued to mount a case of breaking the Mann Act. A bitter ex-girlfriend gave the authorities what they needed to arrest Johnson. He was in jail for a week before being called into a trial the following June. During the trial Johnson was sentenced to a year and a day in prison. Johnson fled to France, lived in exile in South America and Mexico, and returned to serve his sentence in 1920. More about Jack Johnson being convicted of the Mann Act can be read [here](#).





October 17, 1935, African American police officers in South Texas organized the Texas Negro Peace Officers Association, the first Black police organization in the United States. This organization was formed to promote racial equity in law enforcement. The earliest work to develop this initiative began in 1934 by hosting an event in Houston to raise money for a burial fund. Officers from various cities across Texas attended. The event's success led to turning the one-time event into an annual affair. By 1936, officers adopted a constitution and met in Dallas to form a statewide organization. The officers marched in uniform at the 1936 "Negro Day" parade. At that time, hostility towards Black law

enforcement officers was high. The Texas Negro Peace Officers addressed the matter by holding annual conferences throughout the state meeting with local law enforcement officials to exhibit their professionalism. In 1955 the organization dropped the term "Negro" from its name and became the Texas Peace Officers Association. More about the Texas Peace Officers Association can be read [here](#).

October 18, 1990, American professional basketball player Britney Griner was born in Houston, Texas. Griner plays for the Phoenix Mercury of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). She is a three-time Olympic gold medalist with the U.S. women's national basketball team and a six-time WNBA All-Star. Griner was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine in 2023. She played college basketball for the Baylor Lady Bears in Waco, Texas. She had a breakout junior year in 2012, as the three-time All-American was named the AP Player of the Year and the Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four, steering Baylor to winning the National Championship. Griner led the U.S. national women's basketball team to victory at the Rio Olympics in 2016. While traveling in 2022, Griner was detained and arrested on smuggling charges by Russian customs officials who identified hash oil in her luggage. She was sentenced to nine years in a Russian penal colony. Later that year, Griner was released in a prisoner exchange for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout. Griner returned to the WNBA in 2023. More about Britney Griner can be read [here](#)



October 24, 1868, The first African American newspaper in Texas, the *Freeman's Press*, released its final paper after being in operation for three months. Before the American Civil War, African American newspapers were not produced in Texas, and illiteracy amongst enslaved people was legally enforced. After emancipation, these laws dissipated. Newly freed people sought education because learning to read was essential to protect freedoms, gain employment, and communicate with separated family members. The *Freeman's Press* released its first issue on July 18, 1868. It supported Radical Republican matters. While several of the writers were African American, the paper was established by a carpetbagger journalist based in Austin. The *Freeman's Press* explored topics like the forty acres and a mule proposal, uplifting Black civic and spiritual life, and the 1868 Republican National Convention. Production costs were high for the paper, and many of its journalists were not adequately paid. After a critical editor resigned, the paper was dissolved. In 1873, the Galveston Spectator, Texas' first African American-owned and published newspaper, succeeded the *Freeman's Press*. More about the *Freeman's Press* can be read [here](#).