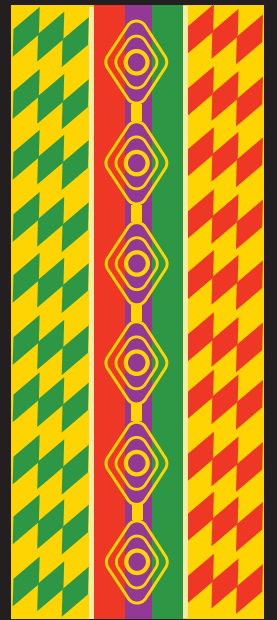


KANSAS CITY BLACK HISTORY



2025

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." —Jackie Robinson

Major League Baseball trailblazer and Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson reminded us that one's legacy is largely defined by the positive influence that it had on others. The six individuals highlighted in the 2025 Kansas City Black History compendium have not only excelled in their respective fields, but they've paved the way for others to succeed: a baseball player and manager who supported Jackie Robinson's ascension to the major leagues, an English teacher who inspired thousands of students, a civil rights activist who fought for education equity, a painter whose style influenced future Black artists, a community leader who fought for human rights, and a musician who was one of the last links to Kansas City's jazz heyday of the 1930s.

Their contributions helped shape our city's history. The mission of the Kansas City Black History project, an ongoing collaboration among the Black Archives of Mid-America, Kansas City Public Library, and LINC, is to share these stories with a broad audience and inspire future generations.

Visit www.kcblackhistory.org for full-length bios and additional content.



Kansas City
Public Library



LINCSM
Stronger Families Together



Anne Thomas

1911 – 2002

Anne Thomas, born Anne Jenkins in Denver, Colorado, dedicated her life to education, counseling, and civil rights. After studying at the University of Denver and the University of Kansas, she moved to Kansas City in 1932. From 1937 to 1942, she taught English at R.T. Coles Vocational School, while working toward a master's degree in counseling from Northwestern University. After earning her degree, she became a counselor at R.T. Coles and later worked with Provident Family and Children's Services. In 1942, she married Dr. Earl D. Thomas, an educator who, in 1963, became Kansas City's first Black city councilperson-at-large. Deeply involved with the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Thomas led membership drives and oversaw the Paseo YWCA branch's construction. In 1958, she became the first Black president of the Kansas City YWCA board and an advocate for school integration, protesting segregation in public spaces. In 1960, Thomas represented the YWCA on a South American tour, sparking a new commitment to international human rights. She continued her advocacy for desegregation and public education when she was elected to the Metropolitan Junior College-Kansas City's board of trustees in 1970. She passed away in 2002, leaving a lasting impact on Kansas City's civil rights landscape.

Photo: The Kansas City Star

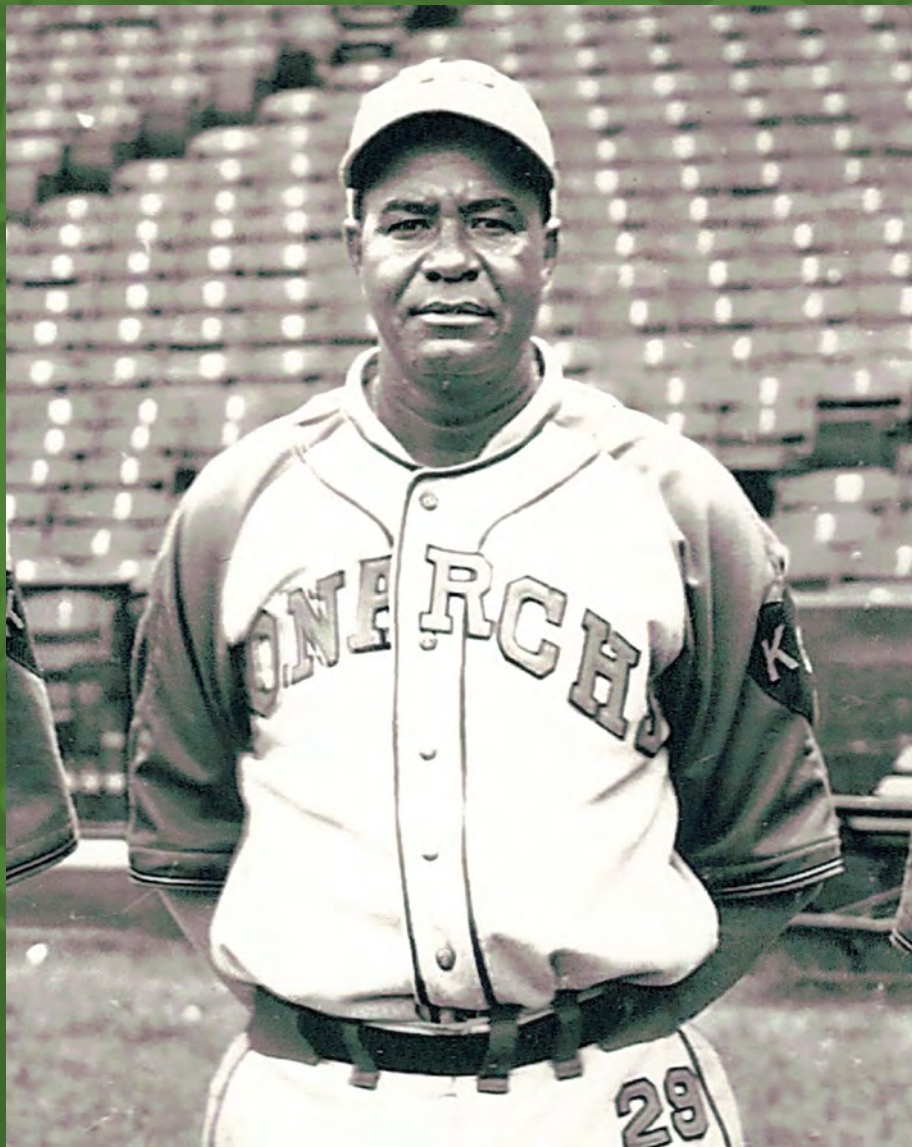


Claude “Fiddler” Williams

1908 – 2004

Claude "Fiddler" Williams was inspired by music from an early age and grew into a Kansas City jazz icon. Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1908, he began performing with his brother-in-law's band at the age of 10. Though he mastered several stringed instruments, it was the violin that would define his career. After hearing a jazz violinist play, his mother gifted him his first fiddle, and he quickly took to the instrument. In 1927, Williams joined the Oklahoma City band that would become the Twelve Clouds of Joy under saxophonist Andy Kirk's direction. He moved to Kansas City with the band, performing with jazz greats like pianist Mary Lou Williams. After leaving the band in 1931, Williams played with Nat "King" Cole and later played guitar for Count Basie's orchestra, earning "Best Guitarist of the Year" from *DownBeat* magazine in 1936. Williams returned to Kansas City in 1953, where he continued performing for decades. He released his first album, "Call The Fiddler," in 1976 and collaborated with Jay McShann on "The Man from Muskogee" in 1980. His final album, "Swingin' the Blues," came out in 2000. He died in 2004 at 96, the last direct link to the 1930s jazz scene.

Photo: LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC University Libraries



Frank Duncan

1901 – 1973

Kansas City native Frank Lee Duncan Jr. was a standout player and manager in baseball's Negro Leagues from 1920-1948. Duncan grew up playing sandlot baseball with other youths in his east side neighborhood. Following high school, he played for teams in Kansas City, St. Joseph, and Chicago, before being signed by his hometown Kansas City Monarchs of the newly formed Negro National League. He made a name for himself as a dominant catcher and aggressive baserunner. Duncan was part of a Monarchs dynasty that won three consecutive league pennants (1923-1925), including the 1924 championship team that won the first Negro League World Series. He went on to play for teams in Chicago, New York, and Pittsburgh, but always returned to Kansas City. He was named the Monarchs' player-manager in 1942, leading the club to a World Series title in his first season and another pennant in 1946. The 1947 season was Duncan's last in baseball, with his friend and former teammate, Buck O'Neil, taking over as manager. However, he remained closely associated with baseball by umpiring Monarchs home games in retirement. Several of Duncan's Monarchs teammates served as pallbearers at his funeral in 1973.

Photo: Courtesy of Larry Lester

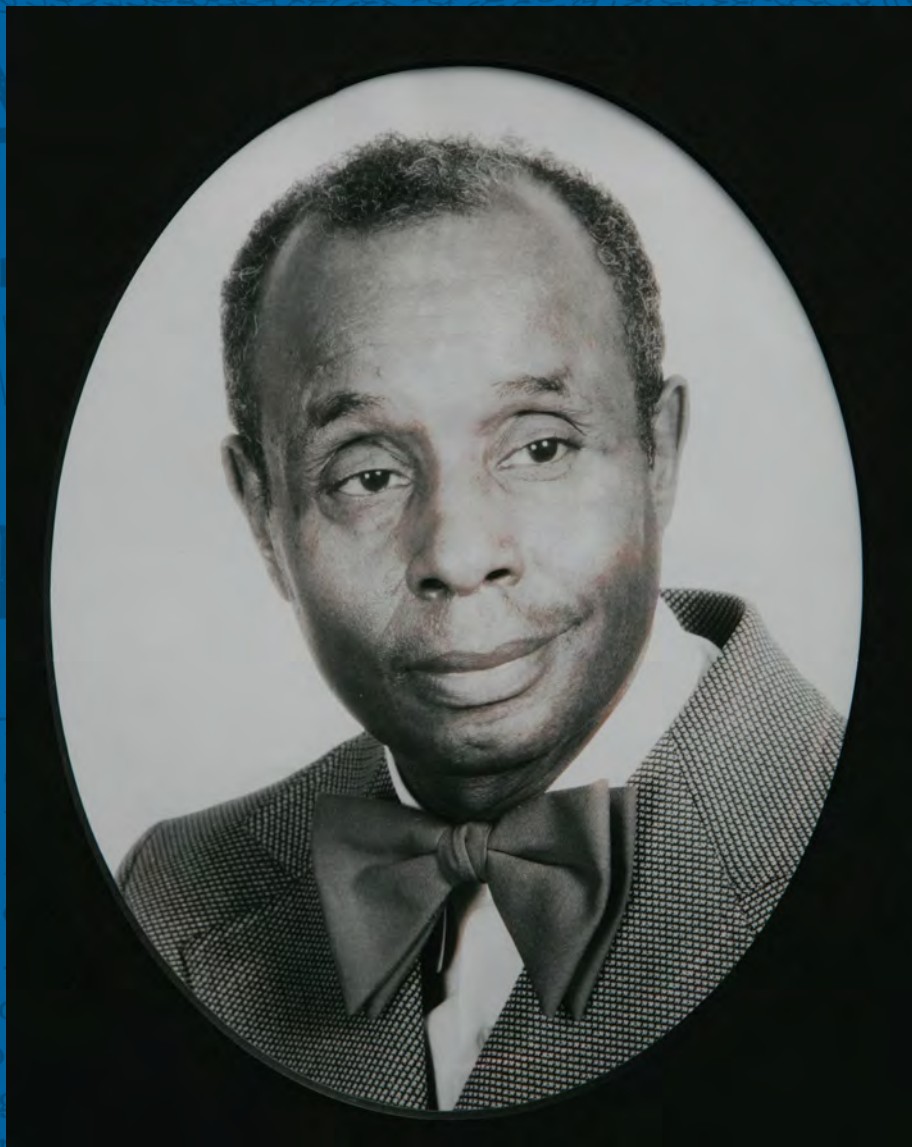


Henry Ossawa Tanner

1859 – 1937

Henry Ossawa Tanner is recognized as the first African American artist to gain international fame. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Benjamin Tanner, a clergyman, and Sarah Tanner, a self-emancipated woman, his upbringing emphasized faith and equality. His middle name, Ossawa, honored Osawatomie, Kansas, a key site of abolitionist John Brown's fight during the Bleeding Kansas conflict. Inspired by a painter in a park at age 13, Tanner went on to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1879, where he was the first Black student. Under Thomas Eakins, he mastered realism but faced discrimination and suffered racist attacks from his peers. Tanner moved to Paris in 1891 and became an internationally renowned artist, particularly for his paintings of African American life and religious subjects. In 1897, he visited his parents in Kansas City, Kansas, where he connected with a vibrant Black artistic community. This experience inspired a stylistic shift, blending his academic training with bold brushstrokes and abstraction seen in the local art community. His Kansas City works included family portraits and expressive landscapes. Tanner married Swedish-American opera singer Jessie Olsson in 1899, an interracial union that defied societal norms. He died at his home in Paris in 1937.

Photo: Archives of Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



Jeremiah Cameron

1919 – 2008

A champion of education and literacy, Dr. Jeremiah Cameron dedicated his life to a teaching career that spanned nearly 50 years. Cameron was born in the 18th and Highland block of Kansas City's east side. He attended Attucks Elementary and the Penn School in Westport. There, instructors fostered in him a lifelong love of English and reading. After graduating from Lincoln High School in 1937, Cameron earned a bachelor's degree in English from Indiana University, a master's degree from the University of Chicago, and a doctorate from Michigan State University. He began his teaching career at R.T. Coles Vocational School and Lincoln High School before moving to higher education, heading the language and literature department at Penn Valley Community College. Cameron was a passionate civil rights advocate. He wrote a regular column for the *Kansas City Call* highlighting the work of the NAACP and, in 1996, received the Harold L. Holliday Sr. Civil Rights Award for his contributions in fighting discrimination. He also served as a Kansas City Parks and Recreation board commissioner from 1972 to 1979.

Shortly before his death, Dr. Jeremiah Cameron Park at 43rd and Broadway was dedicated in his honor.

Photo: Kansas City Parks and Recreation Archives



Julia H. Hill

1922 – 2016

Dr. Julia Hill dedicated her life to civil rights and educational equity. Inspired by her mother, a teacher, Hill developed a love of learning early on. After graduating from Lincoln High School in 1939, she earned a bachelor's degree from Lincoln University, a master's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a doctorate from Nova University. Hill began teaching at Booker T. Washington Elementary in 1943 and later moved into school administration. In 1966, she took a key role in the district's Title I program, advocating for equal educational access for students of all income levels. Elected to the school board in 1984, she served as president from 1990 to 1996, defending educational opportunities for Black children. In 1958, Hill helped found the Community Committee for Social Action, which organized a successful protest to integrate restaurants in downtown department stores. She later served as Kansas City NAACP president from 1971-1980, promoting equitable hiring and voter registration. When Hill died in 2016, U.S. Representative Emanuel Cleaver II honored her as a mentor to many. He noted that nearly all the city's Black leaders he knew were, in some way, students of Julia Hill.

Photo: The Kansas City Star



Source: Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City (BAKC)

[KCBlackHistory.org](https://www.kcblackhistory.org)

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