

Kansas City Black History 2024

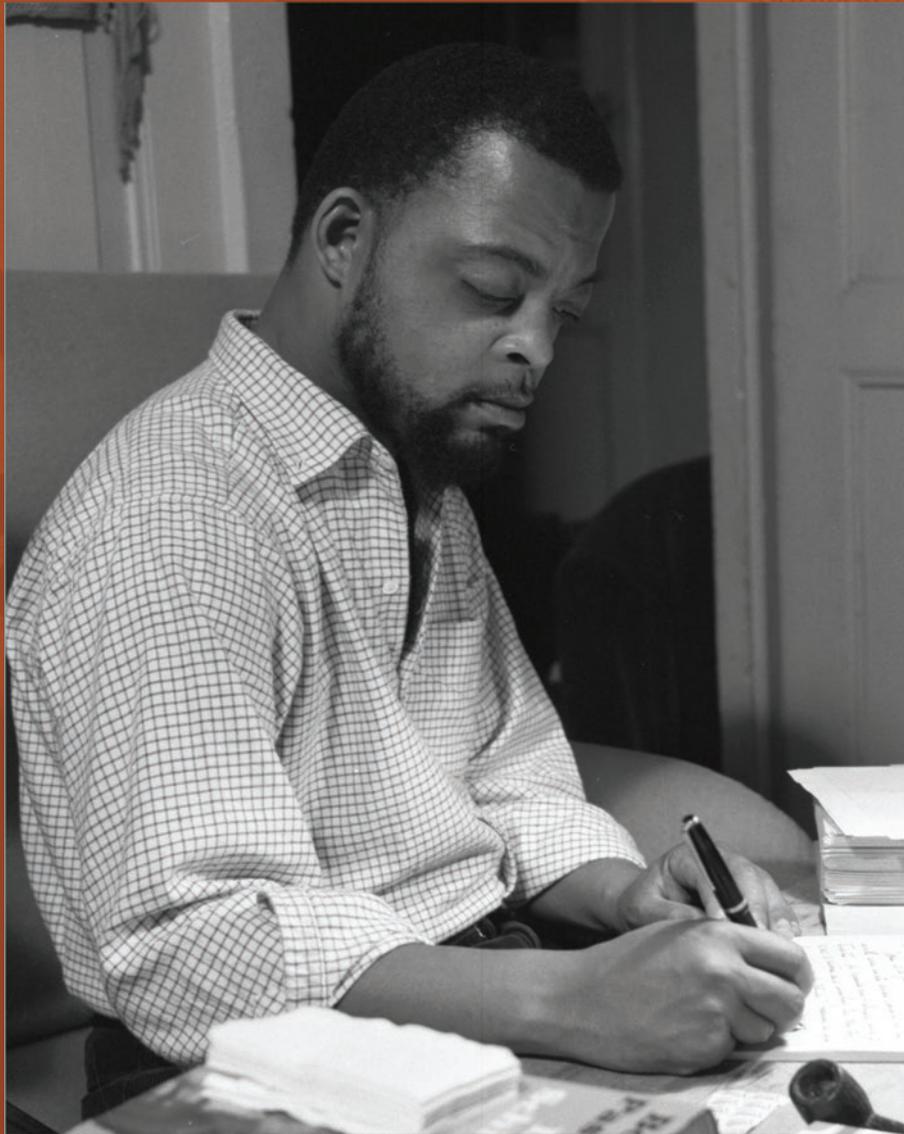
Media mogul Oprah Winfrey famously said, "I was raised to believe that excellence is the best deterrent to racism or sexism. And that's how I operate my life."

The individuals highlighted in the 2024 Kansas City Black History compendium embody excellence in their respective fields: an educator and activist who empowered Black students and women, a politician committed to improving the lives of his Black constituents, an author who wrote about Black family life in segregated Kansas City in the 1930s, a trailblazing composer who became one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, a physician who opened the first community health center in Missouri, and an iconic blues singer affectionally called "Mama" by the many musicians she mentored.

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 Local Investment Commission, is to share these stories with a broad audience and inspire future generations.

Visit KCBlackHistory.org for full length-bios and additional content.





Vincent O. Carter

1924 – 1983

A child of the Great Depression, Vincent O. Carter was thankful for the comfortable upbringing his parents provided and devoted himself to the written word. Carter was born in 1924 and grew up an only child in a once-bustling East Side neighborhood. He graduated from Lincoln High School in 1941 and enlisted in the Army, serving in France during World War II. There, he was artistically inspired and, as a Black intellectual, felt more welcomed than at home. Carter returned to the U.S. and used the G.I. Bill to study English and poetry. He also saved money for a return to Europe, a dream that became a reality in 1953. He found Bern, Switzerland, to his liking and stayed. Carter focused on writing and completed two books by the early 1960s. One, a novel set in Kansas City about a Black boy growing up in the 1930s, would not be published in his lifetime. Carter died in 1983. A copy of his novel was discovered among his possessions, and *Such Sweet Thunder* was published in 2003. The work has been praised for its lyrical prose and honest portrayal of Black domestic life in the early 20th century.

Photo: P. Kräuchi



Myrtle Foster Cook

1870 – 1951

Educator, social worker, and suffragist Myrtle Foster Cook devoted her life to enhancing the political and economic lives of African Americans, particularly Black women and girls. Following her marriage in 1916, Foster Cook left teaching to devote time to social work. She participated in the organization of the Paseo YWCA, advocated for the Jackson County Home for Negro Boys, and served as secretary for the Federation of Colored Charities. In 1921, Gov. Arthur Hyde appointed Foster Cook to the Missouri Negro Industrial Commission, where she helped shape legislation affecting the state's Black population. Through her engagement in Republican politics, Foster Cook worked to bring more Black women into political life. To promote Black economic independence, she participated in the creation of the Home Seekers Saving and Loan and the Peoples Finance Corporation in 1926. She also created the Negro Business Women's Club and organized a local branch of the Housewives League to promote patronage of Black-owned businesses. A leader in the National Association of Colored Women, Foster Cook edited *National Notes* and served as president of the Central Association of the NACW from 1934 to 1938. She died in Los Angeles in 1951 at age 81.

Photo: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library



Phillip B. Curls Sr.

1942 – 2007

Longtime Missouri legislator and political activist Phil Curls Sr. worked tirelessly to bring positive change to the lives of his Black constituents. A native of Kansas City, Curls graduated from De La Salle Military Academy and earned a degree in business administration from Rockhurst College. His father, Fred Curls, owned a real estate company and co-founded Freedom, Inc., a Black political organization, in 1962. Following in his father's footsteps, Phil Curls became a real estate appraiser and served as president of Freedom, Inc., from 1986 to 1994. He was elected to the Missouri House of Representatives in 1972, then to the state Senate in 1983. Known as a savvy politician and consensus builder, Curls was instrumental in passing legislation aimed at improving housing, education, and child and family services. He held leadership roles in the Missouri Legislative Black Caucus and backed legislation supporting the Truman Sports Complex, Bartle Hall, the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, and other major developments. Curls retired from politics in 1998 due to health concerns. He died in 2007, his funeral attended by more than 1,000 people. The Rev. Emanuel Cleaver II, Kansas City's former mayor and then second-term U.S. Representative from Missouri's 5th Congressional District, officiated.

Photo: Black Archives of Mid-America



Nora Douglas Holt

1885 – 1974

Renowned composer, singer, pianist, and music critic Nora Holt broke the boundaries of what was expected of her race and sex. Born Lena Douglas in 1885 in Kansas City, Kansas, she began playing piano at age 4 and became the organist for her father's AME church. Lena earned a bachelor's degree in music and was the first Black woman to earn a master's from Chicago Musical College. In 1918, she began working as a music critic at the *Chicago Defender*, one of the nation's most respected Black newspapers. With pianist Henry Grant, she founded the National Association of Negro Musicians. During her fourth marriage, to wealthy Chicago hotelier George Holt, she adopted the name Nora. She moved after his death to New York and joined the Harlem Renaissance. Holt married a fifth time, divorced, then traveled the world, performing in London, Paris, and Shanghai. Holt settled in Los Angeles in the 1930s, still headlining for long periods in Asia. She returned to New York in the following decade, writing for the *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Courier* and becoming the first Black person to join the Music Critics Circle. Holt died in a nursing home in Los Angeles on January 25, 1974.

Photo: International Center of Photography, Gift of Daniel Cowin, 1990, (1544.1990)



Samuel U. Rodgers

1917 – 1999

Dr. Samuel U. Rodgers dedicated his life to providing health care to those who needed it most. Born in Alabama in 1917, he took inspiration from his father, a doctor who treated all patients regardless of their ability to pay. Later, Rodgers graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C., then one of just two medical schools open to Black students. He came to Kansas City to intern at General Hospital No. 2, the city's segregated hospital for Black patients, before leaving to serve in the Army Medical Corps during World War II. Rodgers was impressed by the equitable treatment of both patients and health care professionals in Army hospitals and found the conditions at General Hospital No. 2 unacceptable when he returned home. In addition to supply and equipment shortages, Black doctors were denied training. In response, Rodgers and a group of colleagues went on strike. After just a few days, the city agreed to address their concerns and created training programs for Black doctors. In 1968, Rodgers took over the Wayne Miner Health Center, a clinic dedicated to serving underprivileged patients. The facility was renamed the Samuel U. Rodgers Health Center in his honor in 1988.

Photo: Black Archives of Mid-America



Annetta Washington

1931 – 2007

A songwriter, musician, and poet, Annetta “Cotton Candy” Washington reigned almost four decades as the Queen of Kansas City Blues. Born on New Year’s Day 1931, she was raised by her grandmother in relative poverty. After early exposure to music on the radio, Washington formed a gospel group in 1971 and was a fixture on the local blues scene within a decade. She co-founded the Kansas City Blues Society in 1980 and soon thereafter lost a leg to diabetes. She refused to let the loss derail her. In 1998, her band, Cotton Candy and So Many Men, won best blues group in the city and placed third in the International Best Blues Band Contest. Washington also advocated for disabled people through the Amputee Coalition of America and performed at the national convention in 2000, though she was perhaps best known as a mother figure in the local blues community. Taking performers under her wing and donating time and energy to various causes earned her the nickname “Mama.” Washington was performing at a benefit event on December 15, 2007, when she suffered a stroke on stage. She died on Christmas Day at age 76.

Photo: LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Libraries



*Circa 1938 photograph of the Black Elks parade crowd on south side of 18th Street, between The Paseo and Vine Street, Kansas City, MO.
Source: Black Economic Union. Photo: Goin' to Kansas City Collection courtesy of the Kansas City Museum*



Celebrating our 50th Anniversary!

The Black Archives of Mid-America needs your support to fulfill its mission by continuing to present the remembrance, reflections, experiences, and historical contributions of African Americans and to encourage everyone to have a deeper appreciation of this region's history while preserving the legacy for future generations. Give your support today at BlackArchives.org

KCBlackHistory.org

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