

## **BLACK HISTORY FACTS**

### **Month of February 2009**

**James Weldon Johnson** – (1871-1938), American author, lawyer, and diplomat, whose writings and activities demonstrated his deep consideration of black life in the United States. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, Johnson was educated at Atlanta and Columbia universities. In 1898 he became the first black admitted to the Florida bar. He practiced law in Florida until 1902, when he moved with his brother, composer John Rosamond Johnson, to New York City. There they worked as songwriters, having already collaborated on the well-known song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900). They found success in New York, where they wrote about 200 songs as well as a musical, *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* (1906). Later Johnson served as U.S. consul, in Venezuela from 1906 to 1909 and in Nicaragua from 1909 to 1912. He was field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1916 to 1920, and in 1920 he became the NAACP’s first black executive secretary. He held the post until 1930, when he became a professor of creative literature at Fisk University in Tennessee.

**Benjamin Banneker** (1731-1806), African American farmer, self-taught mathematician and astronomer. Banneker was born in Maryland and spent most of his life on the tobacco farm he inherited from his father. Although he received little schooling, Banneker demonstrated exceptional scientific ability. At age 22 he constructed a clock made entirely of wood, with each gear carved entirely by hand. In 1789 U. S. President George Washington appointed Banneker to the commission charged with planning the construction of Washington, D.C.; with Major Andrew Ellicott, he helped survey the site of the national capital between 1791 and 1793.

Banneker also became widely known as the compiler of *The Pennsylvania Delaware Maryland, and Virginia Almanac and Ephemeris*, published annually from 1792 to 1802. He sent the manuscript of the first almanac to revolutionary leader and future U. S. president Thomas Jefferson, then secretary of state. With the manuscript, Banneker included a letter in which he protested slavery and disputed Jefferson’s claim that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites. Abolitionists use the almanacs as evidence of the intellectual capabilities of blacks.

**Maxine Waters** (1938- ), Democratic member of the United States House of Representatives from California (1991- ). Waters was born in St. Louis, Missouri. She moved in 1961 to Los Angeles, where she worked in a garment factory and for the telephone company. In 1966 Waters became an assistant teacher for Head Start, a federally sponsored program intended to provide preschool education for children from culturally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Waters earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology in 1970 from California State University in Los Angeles. In 1976 she won election to the California Assembly, where she served until winning the open House seat in California’s 29<sup>th</sup> Congressional District in 1990. After redistricting in 1992, the 29<sup>th</sup> District was renumbered as the 35<sup>th</sup> District.

The 35<sup>th</sup> District includes part of the South Central Los Angeles, including the neighborhood of Watts, as well as the cities of Hawthorne, Inglewood, and Gardena. Inglewood is a predominately black, middle-class city of 110,000 and the home of the Great Western Forum. Gardena is the site of the U.S. headquarters of Honda Motor Co.

In the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress (1997-99), Waters was the ranking Democrat on the General Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the Banking and Financial Services Committee. She also sat on the Judiciary Committee.

Life ev'ry voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the list'ning skies,  
Let is resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ing rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears have been watered,  
We have come, treading our feet path thro' the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way'  
Thou who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,  
True to our God, true to our native land.

James Weldon Johnson