

Recognizing the Prominent Black Trailblazers of Newport News During Women’s History Month

Newport News, VA, March 1, 2024 – Newport News boasts a rich legacy of remarkable Black women who have left an indelible mark on history. From pioneering musicians to award-winning performers, our city has been the cradle of extraordinary talent. As we honor these iconic figures, we also celebrate the unsung heroines whose contributions have paved the way for aspiring female politicians, entrepreneurs, educators, and trailblazers. In Newport News, these women include:

Pearl Bailey

Pearl Bailey, born in Newport News in 1918, was a beloved American singer and actress. Rising to prominence in the 1940s, Bailey’s career spanned decades, earning her numerous accolades, including a Tony Award for her portrayal of Dolly Levi in “Hello, Dolly!” Beyond the entertainment industry, Bailey was a trailblazer, breaking racial barriers in the industry and advocating for civil rights causes. She was known to speak out against discrimination and segregation, both within the entertainment industry and society at large. The Pearl Bailey Library, located at 2510 Wickham Avenue, serves as a tribute to her legacy and contributions to the arts and literature.

Carrie Riggins Brown

Carrie, a teacher and community leader in Newport News, led the effort to acquire Joseph Thomas Newsome’s historic Queen Anne house and transform it into a museum honoring his legacy as an attorney, journalist, and civic leader. Today that home is The Newsome House Museum and Cultural Center on Oak Avenue at 28th Street. Carrie and her husband lived just two doors down from the Newsome house. After she died in 1997 at the age of 84, Carrie left her estate to the Newsome House Foundation. Five years later, her former home on 28th Street became the Cornelius and Carrie R. Brown Education Center, which houses the Newsome archives.

Ella Fitzgerald

Nicknamed “The First Lady of Song,” Ella Fitzgerald was the most popular female jazz singer in the nation for more than 50 years. Born in 1917 in Newport News, Fitzgerald won 13 Grammy awards and sold over 40 million

albums before her death in 1996 at the age of 79. Her voice was flexible and wide-ranging, giving her the ability to sing sultry ballads, sweet jazz, and imitate every instrument in an orchestra. She worked with numerous jazz legends, from Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Nat King Cole to Frank Sinatra, Dizzy Gillespie and Benny Goodman. During the grand opening of Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in 2008, located just a few blocks away from her birthplace on Marshall Avenue, a 276-seat theater was dedicated as the Ella Fitzgerald Theater.

Norvleate Downing-Gross

Norvleate moved to Newport News after graduating from college and marrying Dr. Ernest Downing. Her passion and dedication to the community ranged from serving on a number of local committees to congressional delegations on housing, social services, equal opportunity, minority relations, policing, and recreation. Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center was named in her honor.

Inettie Banks Edwards

Though she was born in South Carolina, Inettie moved with her family to Newport News in 1923 at age 6. After graduating from Huntington High School and earning degrees from Talladega College and Columbia University, she taught school in Newport News for 38 years, retiring in 1978. Known for her love of education and her civic involvement, Inettie tutored children well into retirement, established two scholarship funds, and belonged to dozens of community organizations. She was the first woman chair of the Newport News electoral board and a founding member of Gethsemane Baptist Church. Inettie died in 2013 at the age of 96.

Queen Esther Marrow

A soul and gospel singer and songwriter, Queen was born in Newport News in 1941. She began her career at 22 when she was discovered by Duke Ellington. She played Auntie Em on Broadway in *The Wiz* and has performed for U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton.

Hazel R. O'Leary

In the mid-1990s, Hazel was appointed by President Bill Clinton as U.S. Secretary of Energy. She was the first woman and first African American to hold that position. From 2004 to 2013, Hazel served as president of Fisk University, a historically black college and her alma mater. Born in 1937 in Newport News, Hazel attended school in the city for eight years before moving to New Jersey.



Lavinia Marian Fleming Poe

Born in Newport News in 1890, Lavinia was the first African-American woman to pass the bar examination in the state of Virginia. She was subsequently the first African-American woman admitted to practice law in Virginia, where she continued to practice well into the 1960s.

Jessie Rattley

In 1986, Jessie Rattley became the first female and the first Black mayor of Newport News after serving 16 years on City Council. Born in Alabama, Rattley moved to Virginia to attend Hampton Institute, now Hampton University. After graduating in 1951, she began teaching at Huntington High School, where she created the city's first business course. She later founded Peninsula Business College. In addition to her leadership in Newport News, she was the first Black president of the Virginia Municipal League and the first woman and first Black person to head the National League of Cities. Rattley passed away in 2001.

We hope you found inspiration in the stories of resilience and strength showcased by these remarkable African American women from Newport News. As Women's History Month kicks into gear, let's continue to spread their stories far and wide.

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