

# A History of Black Madison

By **Michael Johnson** - Jan 27, 2018



Dear Students, Teachers, Parents and Community Members:

I am writing this hoping you will read the history of Blacks in the Greater Madison region and hope you will celebrate Black History Month this February by reading the accomplishments of many Blacks in our community. Sometimes we focus so much on slavery and the civil rights movement that we forgot to share accomplishments achieved by Black people in our backyard.

Here are some indicators on how the Black community has influenced the Greater Madison region and Wisconsin for more than 175 years. Below is a timeline which was created by the Capital Times, Madison365, myself and leaders from the African American community.

It starts in 1839: An unidentified African American female was a servant to the owner of the American House Hotel. She became the first Black



*The American House Hotel*

resident of Madison. No identification is available on her name. She apparently stayed in Madison until 1845.

1847: The census first lists a Black Madison resident by name: **Darky Butch**. He lives alone with no apparent connections to a white family. He is one of six black residents in a Madison population of 632 residents.

1848: As Wisconsin becomes a state, black families arrive in Madison. Their purpose for coming to Madison as free individuals appeared to be the pursuit of economic opportunity and a new life.

1850: **J. Anderson**, a Black barber from Ohio, opens his own barber shop in Madison. He arrived in Madison in 1848 and purchased a lot on the corner of Oilman and Henry streets and one at the corner of Hamilton and Dayton streets for a combined \$400.

1850: **William H. Noland** becomes the first Black person to be nominated for a statewide post, but he never takes office. He was from New York and his kids would become the first black kids born in Madison. He would eventually be nominated for the state position of notary public and the Governor accepted the nomination, but the Secretary of State refused to accept the bond with this notation: "This man is a n\*\*\*\*r, and the secretary refuses to file his bond." Jones was never appointed to the position.

1866: Madison gets its first Black candidate for mayor, but it's not by his own choosing. The Wisconsin Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Gillespie v. Palmer* delivered on March 30, 1866 that blacks have had the right to vote since 1849. Four days later, **William H. Noland** appears on the ballot for Madison's mayor against incumbent **Elisha E. Keyes**, a Republican. The chosen Democratic candidate declined to run, and the party wants Noland to run as an independent. Noland is insulted, saying the Democrats had been responsible for attitudes promoting white superiority, but his name nonetheless ends up on the ballot. Noland loses 692-306 and says he voted for the incumbent.

1902: The Free African Methodist Church is founded by **John Turner**, a former Kentucky slave, and for years serves as the center of Madison's black community.

1913: The Mount Zion Baptist Church is formed as Madison's second black religious organization, originally meeting at the First Baptist Church downtown before moving to its own building at 548 W. Johnson St. in the early 1920s.

1916: Madison's first Black newspaper, the Wisconsin Weekly Blade, debuts. Founded by Madison black leaders **Chestena and J. Anthony Josey**, the newspaper runs social notes, church news and other articles of importance to the black community.

1920: The local NAACP chapter is started. It focused primarily around supporting national programs instead of dealing with local issues at the time.

1940: The depression continues to hit black workers harder than their white counterparts. In Wisconsin, 46 percent of the black population is unemployed compared to 13 percent of whites. In Madison, the black unemployment rate is 25 percent. Madison is also reported to be the most "congenial" city in the state for blacks, but segregation is the standard in housing. Of 365 black residents, 80 percent live in only three of Madison's

*J. Anthony Josey*

20 wards, mostly on the southside with some on the near east side. The same year, **Stanley Shivers** becomes Madison's first black bus driver after being mistaken for a white man at the time of hire.

1949: The South Madison Neighborhood Center opens at 609 Center Drive which is now Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County. The construction of the location was coordinated by Willie Lou Harris a Black community organizer.

1953: **Carson Gulley**, a local Chef at UW Madison, and his wife, **Beatrice**, become Madison's first black TV personalities. WMTV invites the Chef and his wife to host a cooking show called "What's Cookin'." It was the only known program in the United States to feature a black husband-and-wife team on TV in the 1950s.

1958: **Helen McLean** gets an interview with the Madison School District and would be its first black teacher, but the interviewing committee doesn't hire her. The committee chairman says he didn't think the parents of white students would be comfortable with a black teacher.

McLean is soon hired to teach in Beloit. After her story reaches the media, Madison hires her and she begins to work at Longfellow Elementary in 1961.

*Beatrice and Carson Gulley in the  
WMTV studio*

1962: With the civil rights movement fully engaged around the country, some tell Madison NAACP President **Marshall Colston** they want to see demonstrations locally. "This isn't Birmingham," Colston tells

the Wisconsin State Journal for a July 30 story. "A demonstration wouldn't serve the same purpose here. Not now."

1969: **John Winston Sr.**, father of Madison firefighter **Johnny Winston Jr.** and husband of **Mona Adams Winston**, breaks the color barrier on the Madison police force, becoming the first black police officer in Madison. Twenty-nine years later, he would retire as a lieutenant, having served as a recruiter and mentor for a generation of black officers on the force.

1963: Madison City Council passes an ordinance prohibiting discrimination in housing and employment, but the housing sections are watered down by amendments exempting owner-occupied houses and apartments. **Mayor Henry E. Reynolds** casts the tie breaking vote for the proposal. The Madison Equal Opportunities Commission is formed in 1964.

1965: A group of Black mothers forms a group to help black girls develop a positive self-identity. The Impressionettes Social Service Club is open to girls age 14 to 18.

1966: Three-plus years after the death of former UW and TV chef Carson Gulley's death, UW-Madison names a building after an African-American for the first time. The Van Hise Refectory is renamed Carson Gulley Commons in honor of the longtime dormitory chef who practiced his trade in the building. It was renovated and renamed the Carson Gulley Center in 2013.

*Carson Gulley Center*

1966: **Les Ritcherson** comes to Madison as the Wisconsin Badgers' first black assistant football coach. In 1970, he became the UW-Madison assistant to the chancellor for affirmative action, a post he kept until the 1980s.

1968: The National Urban League approves an application for an affiliate to be located in Madison. Funding for the group is initially rejected by the Givers Fund, now known as the United Way, because "discrimination as it exists in other communities does not exist in Madison."

1970: **Barbara Nichols**, mother of **Nichelle Nichols**, is elected president of the Wisconsin Nursing Association, making her the first African American to hold the position in the organization's 100-year history.

1972: **Charlene Harris-Hodge** becomes the first Black woman news anchor on local television, anchoring the Channel 15 (WMTV) news. She will be followed by other Black News Anchors like Mike McKinney who became one of Madison's most popular television personalities.

*Les Ritcherson*

1973: The Madison School Board adopts an affirmative action policy that commits the school district to actively recruit minorities and women for jobs. **Eugene Parks**, Madison's first African American Alderman and uncle of **Astra Miriaku Iheukumere** and **Kanu Iheukumere**, speaks before the board, arguing that well-qualified minorities could have been hired for district positions had they known about job openings. Parks adds that he knows of two people who were told the district was not hiring at a time when it was filling positions in personnel and curriculum.

*Eugene Parks*

1975: **Pia Kenney James** becomes the first African American women police officer in Madison.

1976: **Dr. John Odom** becomes the first Affirmative Action Officer for the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and would become the first Black middle school principal in Madison.

1983: **Rev. James C. Wright**, father of **Deana Wright**, serves as Chairman of Madison's Equal Opportunities Commission and is selected by Madison's Mayor as the group's first executive director. A school in South Madison is later named in his honor. That same year two south Madison neighborhood centers filed a complaint with the federal Office of Civil Rights claiming racial discrimination by the Madison School District. **Sandra Solberg** and **Richard Harris**, working with the South Madison Neighborhood Center (now Boys & Girls Club) and Neighborhood House, call Madison school Superintendent Douglas Ritchie's plan to close elementary schools and middle schools another step in undermining equal educational opportunities, particularly in south Madison. The courts ruled in June 1983 that the Madison schools were discriminating against minority students in the school closures and boundary changes.

1987: Black students are suspended three times more often than white students in Madison schools, a report prepared for the Madison Urban League says.

1990: **Katherine Marie Jackson** becomes the first Black woman firefighter in Madison and **Milele Chikasa Anana** starts UMOJA Magazine to highlight African Americans in the community. Milele believes the mainstream media have a history of focusing on black struggles without balancing the negative news with the many achievements and victories of the community. She is also the first Black person to be elected to any school board in Wisconsin.

*Katherine Jackson with her granddaughter Trinity, a Madison365 Academy intern*

1991: **Frances Huntley-Cooper** is elected mayor of Fitchburg, the first and only African American mayor elected in the State of Wisconsin.

1992: **Paul Higginbotham** is appointed Madison's first municipal court judge and elected Dane County's first African-American judge in 1994. He is also the first African American to sit on the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, let alone any Appellate Court in the State's history.

*Frances Huntley-Cooper*

1994: **Napoleon Smith** becomes the first African American president of the Madison Common Council. He remains the only Black person to hold that post.

2000: **Richard Williams** is unanimously chosen as Madison's first African American police chief. He comes from the Montgomery County Police Department in Rockville, Md., and is one of nine African-Americans in a pool of 70 applicants

2003: **Henry Sanders** becomes the first Black executive at the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce. During his tenure, he helped start the Small Business Advisory Council and the young professional group Magnet.

2009: Boys & Girls Clubs leaders launch the largest public/private partnership at MMSD, designed to help more than a thousand low income students of color graduate from high school and persist through college. Boys & Girls Club CEO **Michael Johnson** secures close to \$15 million dollars from donors to fund the program and grows the program to all four high schools. According to the University of Vermont, the AVID/TOPS program becomes the most cost efficient college prep program in the nation and the University of Wisconsin conducts several studies that show the program is moving the academic needle for students of color.

2010: **Fabu Phillis Carter** is named Madison's first Black Poet Laureate. The city proclamation naming Fabu says she was chosen for the position "in honor of her years as a major figure in Madison's literary arts movement, inspiring great interest in poetry, reading and writing in Madison, especially in the women's community, among school-aged children and in communities of color. Henry Sanders, who went to schools on the East Side of Madison, becomes the first African American to run for Lt. Governor of Wisconsin.

*Fabu*

2011: The University of Wisconsin renamed Friedrich Hall to **Vel Phillips Hall**, in honor of Phillips. She was the first in many achievements in Wisconsin, including being the first African-American woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School and the first woman and African-American to be elected Secretary of State in Wisconsin. The same year, the Urban League of Greater Madison highlighted the achievement gap between black and white students in Wisconsin that ranks among the worst in the country, Urban League President **Kaleem Caire** proposes a charter school geared toward boys of color in grades 6 through 12. The plan for Madison Preparatory Academy for Young Men, better known as Madison Prep. The school board voted 5-2 in December 2011 to deny Madison Prep a chance to open in fall 2012.

2012: Madison firefighter **Mahlon Mitchell** becomes the first Black major-party nominee for Lieutenant Governor in the recall election of Governor Scott Walker. Mi

2013: The Race to Equity report is released; it shows that racial disparities in poverty, education and unemployment are greater — sometimes far greater — in Dane County than state and national averages. It cites 2011 statistics showing the unemployment rate for African-Americans is 25.2 percent, compared to 4.8 percent for whites. Over half of Dane County's black households are getting by on less than \$20,000 a year.

2015: A group of African American leaders led by the Pastor **Alexander Gee Jr** develops a plan called Justified Anger to address the racial achievement disparities in Dane County. **Henry Sanders** launches Madison365, which becomes the largest news outlet focused on people of color in Wisconsin. The same year, **Barbara H. McKinney** and **Sheri Carter** becomes the first Black women Alders in Madison and **Marilyn Peebles Ruffin** becomes the first person of color elected to the Sun Prairie School Board and the first person of color elected to any public office in Sun Prairie. **Brandi Grayson** becomes a prominent voice in the community as one of the founders of Madison's Young Gifted and Black Coalition. She begins to challenge systemic oppression of Black people and began drawing out hundreds of protesters throughout the city.

*Brandi Grayson (Photo by Nathan Royko Maurer)*

2016: **Judge Everett Mitchell**, a local black pastor holding two undergraduate and three advanced degrees, becomes a circuit court judge in Dane County. He is elected in April 2016 at age 39, and is now one of the youngest circuit court judges in Wisconsin. As of 2016, **Corinda Rainey-Moore** is the only black person to serve as Board Chair of the National Alliance on Mental Health of Dane County, Safe Communities and Leadership Wisconsin. **Gloria Ladson-Billings**, a well respected African American Professor and community leader at UW-

*Judge Everett Mitchell*

Madison is ranked as one of the top five educators in the country for her influence on education policy and practices in the United States.

2017: **Sabrina Madison** launches the Progress Center for Black Women and is featured in news outlets around the country. **Vanessa Rae McDowell** becomes the first African American person to head the YWCA of Dane County. **Tanisha Harbert** opens the first Black Beauty School in Madison and then **Julia Nepper**, a Black student at UW- Madison earns a PhD in biophysics at 23 years of age, making her one of the youngest Ph.D earners in the country.

*Sabrina Madison opens the Progress Center for Black Women*

2018 and beyond: Can be you!!! This year, **Jasmine Zapata**, MD, MPH will become the first Black woman to graduate at UW-Madison Preventative Medicine and Public Health Residency Program.

I am happy to add to this history, since we want it to be as complete as possible. What names and events do you remember? [Email Madison365](#) and tell them the stories you know!

I hope this helps you as you celebrate Black History Month and for those schools that don't celebrate black history month I hope this gives you a guide to start planning.

With Warmest Regards,

Michael Johnson, MBA

Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County

Written by [Michael Johnson](#)

Michael Johnson is president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County.