

Matthew Henson (1866 – 1955)



Matthew Alexander Henson was born in 1866 in Maryland, USA. Henson's parents worked as sharecroppers (farmers who give part of their crop to the landowner as rent). By age 11, both of Henson's parents had died, and he left home searching for a new life. Henson found work as a cabin boy on a ship called *Katie Hines*. The captain educated Henson on life aboard a boat and took him on expeditions. By the end of his time on the *Katie Hines*, he had been to Asia, Africa and Europe. In 1887, Henson met Robert Edwin Peary who worked as an explorer and officer in the US Navy Corps of Civil Engineers. Matthew's skills as a seaman impressed Peary. Over the next 20 years, Henson and Peary conducted many expeditions together. On their first trip to Greenland, Henson explored and educated himself on the culture of the native people of Greenland. Henson learned the language, and the local people taught him Arctic survival skills.

In 1893, Henson and Peary set themselves the goal of mapping the entire ice cap of Greenland. This journey took two years and almost cost the men their lives due to a lack of food. They collected three meteorites on further trips to Greenland in 1896 and 1897, which they later sold to the American Museum of Natural History. The sale of these meteorites helped to fund future expeditions. Henson and Peary spent three years trying to reach the North Pole. One trip ended in disaster, with six of their company dying of starvation out on the ice. In 1905, they made it to within 175 miles of the North Pole. They managed this through the help of a mighty ice-breaking ship provided by Theodore Roosevelt, the president of the United States at the time.

On 6th April 1909, Henson and Peary's team claimed they had accomplished their goal of reaching the North Pole, with Henson arriving 45 minutes before Peary. However, on their return, Peary was awarded several honours, while Henson's contributions were largely overlooked. Soon after, a lack of proof meant that organisations began questioning Henson and Peary's accomplishments. Henson went on to work as a clerk in New York, living most of the next 30 years in relative obscurity. It was not until 1937, when Henson was 70 years old, that Congress fully acknowledged his achievements and he was made a member of the prestigious Explorers Club in New York City.



Wangari Maathai (1940 – 2011)



Wangari Maathai was born in 1940 in rural Kenya, Africa. A programme funded through the Joseph P Kennedy Jr Foundation meant that, as a promising student, Maathai was selected to study in the United States in 1960. She worked hard at Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas and earned a degree in biological sciences. She then gained a master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh and worked on her doctoral studies in Germany before receiving a PhD in veterinary anatomy from the University College of Nairobi in 1971, making her the first woman from Eastern and Central Africa to earn a doctorate. She continued to teach at the University of Nairobi and a senior lecturer in 1975. In 1976, Maathai became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and was appointed as associate professor the following year. In both cases, she was the first woman to work in either of these positions. Alongside her teaching, Maathai joined the National Council of Women of Kenya and later became its chairwoman. In 1976, she proposed the idea of village-based tree planting, with the aim of improving the quality of life for local women, while also conserving the environment. She founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977.

From 2003 to 2007, Maathai acted as Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya's ninth parliament. In 2005, she was appointed Goodwill Ambassador of the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem. She started working with the British and Norwegian governments to prevent deforestation and protect the tropical rainforests. In 2009, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General named Maathai a UN Messenger of Peace with an emphasis on the environment and climate change. A year later, Maathai became a Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust representative. This organisation's main aim was to continue protecting the land for which she had been fighting for almost twenty years. That same year, in partnership with the University of Nairobi, she founded the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies (WMI), which combines research (e.g. land use and forestry) with the Green Belt Movement's attitude towards protecting public land. In 2004, Maathai then became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace."



Aniya Butler (2006 – present)



Aniya Butler is a young spoken word poet and organiser for climate justice. She lives in California, USA. She has written poetry that responds to events that impact her community. Butler has spoken about how her poetry has become a way to express her experiences with racism in society. Aniya began writing poetry at eight years old, at which time she focused on issues such as police brutality and school systems.

Butler became involved in the fight for climate change when she joined the Youth vs Apocalypse (YVA) movement, a youth-led organisation based in California. The group organises events in which hundreds of students rally and march to demand climate justice. Butler believes there is hope for the climate and a chance to rebuild a world where every living thing can thrive. In 2019, at the age of 12, she wrote a book called 'This World Is Going to Change' about the foundations of equity, sustainability and love.

In 2022, Butler became the youngest recipient of the Utah Award in the Environmental Humanities in recognition of her approach to activism, which connects literature, environmentalism and social justice.



Barack Obama (1961 – present)



Barack Obama was born in 1961 on the island of Hawaii, USA. Barack spent some of his early childhood in Indonesia before returning to Hawaii to continue his education. Barack studied for two years at Occidental College in Los Angeles before transferring to Columbia University, where he studied political science and international relations. Obama graduated in 1983 and went on to work in New York, before becoming a community organiser in Chicago. His primary focus was to improve community infrastructure and set up job training facilities.

In 1988, Obama decided to further his education at Harvard Law School, where he became the first Black president of the 'Harvard Law Review'. After graduating from Harvard, Barack went to work for a law firm in Chicago. His job focused mainly on civil rights. In 1992, he married another Harvard Law School graduate, Michelle Robinson. In 1996, Obama was elected to the Illinois Senate, his first big step into politics. He was elected to the US Senate in 2004. Obama gained respect and fame for his work in the Democratic party.

In 2008, Obama was elected the first Black president of the United States. During his presidency, he worked to improve the economy, pushed for fair pay for women and made healthcare more affordable. He was re-elected as president in 2012. With Obama as president, the US government signed a climate change agreement with 195 nations which looked to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow global warming. Although Obama's presidency ended in 2017, he maintains a presence in American politics. In 2022, he won a Primetime Emmy award for his narration of the Netflix documentary series 'Our Great National Parks'.



Dwayne Fields (1983 – present)



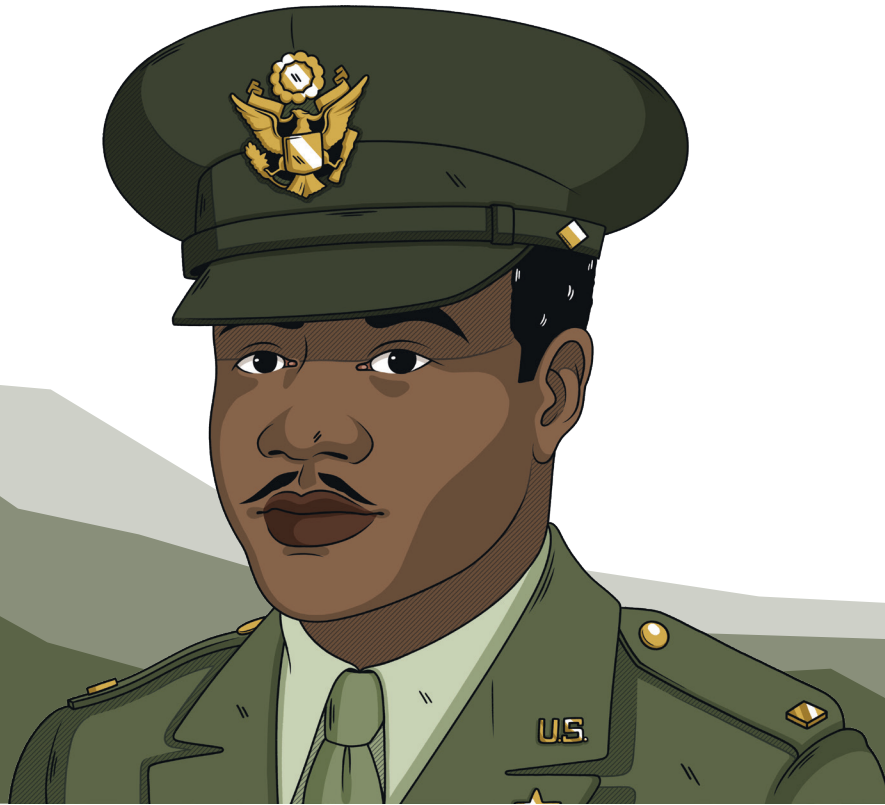
Dwayne Fields was born in Jamaica and moved to London at the age of six. While living in London as a young man, he had a life-changing incident when he became a victim of violent crime. This incident rekindled Fields' love of nature, evoking memories from his early life and the scenery of Jamaica. He completed a combined honours degree in psychology, international development and business management at the University of East London. As a student, he became interested in joining an expedition to Antarctica but he was too late to apply. Instead, he was asked if he would be interested in joining an expedition to the North Pole to commemorate the trip made by explorers Matthew Henson and Robert Peary 100 years earlier. Fields worked as an electrical and mechanical engineer for the London Underground for three years while raising funds to pursue his passion.

In 2010, Fields became the first Black Briton to walk to the magnetic North Pole. On his return, he was invited to Buckingham Palace to meet Queen Elizabeth II as part of a reception to mark the 100-year anniversary of Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the South Pole. After completing the journey to the North Pole, Fields set himself another challenge: to inspire people (particularly young people growing up in cities) to engage with and explore the great outdoors, channelling his passion for geography and his personal experiences into his work. Fields' story is particularly inspiring for those who might traditionally be under-represented in the field of geography.

Fields' work led to him being awarded the Freedom of the City of London, an honour bestowed upon the most valued members of the community. Fields is still active and continues taking groups of disadvantaged young people from across the UK on transformative expeditions. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and, in 2018, was awarded their Geographical Award in recognition of his outstanding contribution to empowering young people to explore the world. He has appeared on a variety of TV programmes, including 'Daily Politics', 'BBC Breakfast', 'Countryfile' and 'The One Show' and has features in newspapers such as The Guardian and The Telegraph.



Louis R Purnell (1920 – 2001)



Louis R Purnell was born in 1920 in Maryland, USA. Louis' parents were teachers and encouraged him to take his education seriously. During his childhood in New Jersey, he spent hours watching planes in the sky and developed a keen interest in becoming a pilot. In 1939, Purnell began studying psychology at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania but left soon after the start of the Second World War to enrol in a newly developed pilot training course for Black men at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama. After completing the training course, Louis served in the 99th Fighter Squadron and later as part of the 332nd Fighter Group, completing two tours of duty in Italy and North Africa.

Following the war, Purnell returned to Lincoln University to finish his degree. After graduating, he had a variety of jobs before finding one that explored his other passion in life: the natural world. In 1961, he began work as a museum specialist at the Division of Invertebrate Zoology at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, where his main job was to prepare specimens and organise field trips. Purnell was self-taught when it came to fossils and geology at this point. However, this did not stop him from producing two books on invertebrate fossils. His passion deepened, and he decided to study geology at George Washington University. Louis became especially adept at identifying fossils called nautiloids and cephalopods.

In 1968, Purnell started work as a museum specialist at the Astronautics Department at the National Air and Space Museum. This was an exciting time as the 1969 moon landing raised the profile of space and science museums. This led him on a path to become the first Black curator of the National Air and Space Museum in 1980, making history and inspiring future history makers.

