

# CHANGING THE GAME

WHILE COMPILING THIS LIST WE—A GROUP THAT INCLUDES EDITORS, scholars, writers, and historians—soon came to realize that the most important events in black history, “game changers,” as the journalist Greg Tate (“The Genius Electric,” Summer 2010) puts it, were those that often leap fully to mind without a second thought, so thoroughly are they written into our history. I will note them here in a list that is by no means exhaustive: the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved Americans; the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, abolishing “separate but equal” schools as being unconstitutional and ushering in the end of segregation and leading to the contentious integration of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas three years later; the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a white man and the ensuing Montgomery Bus Boycott; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy; the 1963 March on Washington during which Dr. King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech; the signing of the Civil Rights and National Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965; and of course the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. We are all so familiar with these seminal moments, we can probably recite them in our sleep. Because we have limited space, we’ve decided to confine our list to those events that occurred mostly in the United States and, for the most part, we have excluded the arts—we could fill many pages with music and literature alone. You’ll notice we’ve fudged a bit and combined events on some entries because they are so closely related. Still, we hope the following

**CELEBRATING  
A DECADE  
AND A HALF OF  
PUBLICATION  
WITH 15  
INFLUENTIAL  
MOMENTS IN  
AFRICAN-  
AMERICAN  
HISTORY**

**BY AUDREY PETERSON**

will be thought-provoking, enlightening, and maybe even a bit surprising. (Since our history does not end in 1972,, for 15 more game changers not listed here visit [www.americanlegacymag.com](http://www.americanlegacymag.com).)

## THE ARRIVAL OF AFRICANS IN JAMESTOWN

1619

THE DISTINCTION OF RECEIVING THE first group of Africans might have gone to Hampton, Virginia, had it not been for a picky Dutch ship's captain. After dropping anchor in the harbor in Hampton in 1619 with several indentured African servants onboard, the captain decided that site wasn't adequate, collected some provisions, and moved on to Jamestown. Traded by the captain for those provisions and baptized Christians, the Africans would be as free as their white counterparts once they served out their indentures. For the next few decades, blacks were able to gain their freedom and own land, livestock, even servants of their own, and some did. But by the early eighteenth century, British laws had been changed to make all servants who were not Christians in their native countries, including Africans and Native Americans, servants for life. Slavery in the British colonies, and in North America, began in earnest.

## THE OMISSION OF THE WORDS "SLAVES" AND "SLAVERY"

FROM THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

1776 AND 1787-1789

ALTHOUGH SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE trade had taken hold and would thrive in the new United States, the words to describe this "industry" were absent from both the published version of the Declaration of Independence and the ratified U.S. Constitution. Thomas Jefferson, given the task to write the first draft of the Declaration, inveighed against King George III for supporting

the slave trade, calling it "a cruel war against human nature."

Both northern and southern delegates at the Second Continental Congress, fearing that divisiveness might weaken the revolutionary effort, demanded that the allusion to slavery be removed. The northern colonies could not afford to have the south bow out because of anti-slavery sentiment; every last colonist would be needed to defeat the British. And so those sentences were deleted.

Slavery is mentioned in the Constitution in a few key places, but euphemistically. The first is in the Enumeration Clause, where the number of representatives are designated for each state. Southern states insisted that slaves (called "other persons in the Constitution) be counted; Northerners wanted them excluded. They finally agreed that "other persons" would count as three-fifths of a man. The slave trade, called in the Constitution the "Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit" could not be abolished until 1808 according to Article 1, Section 9, giving the trade another 20 years of life. The Fugitive Slave Clause made it possible for

ed in one of the most important documents in U.S. history.

## THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

1791-1804

THE ONLY SUCCESSFUL WIDE-SCALE revolt of enslaved blacks anywhere in the world began with the slaughter of whites by blacks in the late summer of 1791, in areas surrounding the main port town of Cap François (now Cap Haitien) in Saint-Domingue. Occupying the western third of the Spanish island of Hispaniola, an area that had been ceded to the French in 1697, Saint-Domingue (it would become Haiti in 1804) was the gem of the Caribbean, the envy of the British, yielding more sugar, indigo, coffee, and cotton on its plantations than any other European colony. It was also a place of horrifying cruelty for the enslaved. Led by a Vodou priest named Boukman, several thousand slaves (there were some 500,000 of them on that part of the island, many fresh off-the-boat African warriors) revolted, burning the northern plain to the ground.

A man named Toussaint L'Ouverture rose to become the leader of this



*An undated engraving of rebels on Saint-Domingue fighting against the French army.*

slaveholders to go into any state, including free states, and extradite the runaway "person held to service or labour." Without ever using the word "slave," the seeds of a bitter Civil War that would tear apart the nation some 70 years later were plant-

revolution, driving the British from Saint-Domingue when, beginning in 1793, they spent five years trying to snatch the West Indian jewel from France. That L'Ouverture had the audacity, as a black man, to aspire to such

South, who was speaking not only to Congress, but the nation, and the world, his speech must have seemed nothing short of miraculous, especially to African-


Americans. Johnson would go on to sign into law a raft of civil rights legislation during his second term in office. He would also appoint the first African-

American, NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall, to the Supreme Court in 1967.

## STOKELY CARMICHAEL CALLS FOR BLACK POWER 1966

IN THE SUMMER OF 1966 JAMES MEREDITH, the first black student to graduate from the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in 1964, began a solo March against Fear. He was shot by a sniper and hospitalized. Other civil rights activists including Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Stokely Carmichael decided to continue the walk for Meredith. When they arrived at Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael made a speech calling for “black people in the country to unite, to recognize their heritage, and to build a sense of community.” Although the idea of Black Power was not new, Carmichael put the spotlight on black self-determination, heralding “a fiery, astringent belligerence in both public rhetoric and political action,” as journalist and author Gene Seymour wrote in the article the “Black Decade” in the Fall 2004 issue of this magazine. The same year as Carmichael’s Greenwood speech, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California.

## ALEX HALEY'S ROOTS 1976

THE 1976 BOOK, AND SUBSEQUENT ABC TV miniseries about the life of an African named Kunta Kinte who was captured and sold into slavery in the United States sparked a conversation about race and history that most Americans had never had. Not since Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was there such a deep impact on so many people. *Roots* taught others that African-Americans had genealogies as complex as their own, even if they couldn’t always create a paper trail to prove it. It also displayed in full-color over eight consecutive nights, the tragedy of slavery in America. It became the most watched miniseries in U.S. television history. 

## SHIRLEY CHISHOLM RUNS FOR PRESIDENT 1972



IN JANUARY 1972, NEW YORK CONGRESSWOMAN SHIRELY Chisholm announced her candidacy for the office of President of the United States. For the next seven months while on the campaign trail until her appearance at the Democratic National Convention in Miami, Chisholm would be physically attacked three times, face strong opposition from members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other African-American organizations, as well as resistance from leaders of the women’s movement (The feminist Gloria Steinem said Shirely Chisholm was good but George McGovern was great.) Her answer to all who criticized and attacked her was “If you can’t support me, or you can’t endorse me, get out of my way.” She lost the nomination, but in the end there may have been a measure of success—she won a federal court order that broke the lock front-runners had on televised debates and was able to gain television time. She also carried 152 delegates, giving her the right to speak from the podium at the convention. She was the champion of the underrepresented and underserved: the poor, minorities, women, gays. What is sometimes forgotten is that she was not only the first woman to run for President, but also the first African-American. In one fell swoop, Chisholm changed the face of what a presidential candidate, until then all white and almost all male, could be.

There would be others who would try and fail—Jesse Jackson, Lenore Fulani, Alan Keyes, Rev. Al Sharpton, until a senator from Illinois would be elected to the highest office of the United States in 2008. Chisholm paved the way.

*Shirley Chisholm clasps hands with Sen. Hubert Humphrey (left) and presidential nominee George McGovern at the 1972 Democratic Convention.*

only seven years earlier. In response Southern legislators passed ever harsher laws restricting the movement of enslaved and free blacks, and fortified their militias, cementing an inhumane system of bondage for the next half-century.

## THE PLESSY V. FERGUSON DECISION 1896

IN 1892 A 30-YEAR-OLD CREOLE OF COLOR named Homer Plessy was arrested for sitting in the “white” car on the East Louisiana Railroad. Although he could pass for white, under state law he was considered black. Louisiana had passed the Separate Car Act in 1890 making segregation on trains and other “common carriers” legal. Plessy and others decided to challenge the law by having a light-skinned man deliberately sit in the white car and announce that he was black. Plessy’s lawyer argued that the East Louisiana Railroad Company had denied him rights guaranteed by the 14th amendment. Justice John Howard Ferguson, who presided over the trial on the state level, ruled against Plessy, and in 1896 the case made its way to the Supreme Court, where a majority vote (Justice John Harlan was the lone dissenter) upheld the state of Louisiana. The grand fiction of “separate but equal” would give legal justification for relegating minorities to inferior education, housing, health care, and public facilities.

## THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SLEEPING CAR PORTERS IS FOUNDED 1925

ALTHOUGH A JOB AS A SLEEPING CAR porter was considered a good one by African-Americans in the early twentieth century, the Pullman Company, for which they worked, still took advantage of its black employees, requiring the porter to work 400 hours a month or 11,000 miles (roughly 13 hours a day, seven days a week) in order to receive full salary. The porters had tried to form a union with no success until 1925, when

A. (Asa) Philip Randolph, a 36-year-old labor leader and civil rights activist organized the men into the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and became its first president. After 12 years

A. Philip Randolph would go on to become one of the most effective if undersung civil rights activist in American history, a main architect of the March on Washington in 1963.



## THE FORMATION OF THE NIAGARA MOVEMENT AND THE NAACP 1905 AND 1909

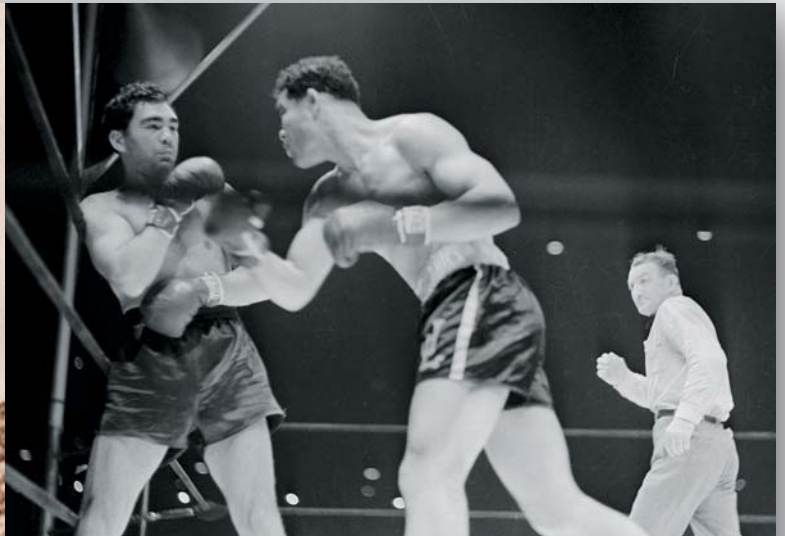
OPPOSED TO THE CONCILIATORY DOCTRINE OF THE EDUCATOR Booker T. Washington toward whites, civil rights activist, sociologist, and author W.E.B. DuBois called a conference that included William Monroe Trotter and other members of the African-American intellectual elite. The Niagara movement, so-called because it was held near the famous waterfalls of the same name, provided a militant alternative to Washington’s policies of accommodation and his refusal to fight for integration and civil rights for blacks. Washington struck back by keeping the movement out of the black press, killing its publicity. The lack of funds and a headquarters scuttled the organization, but in 1909 after a horrific race riot in Springfield, Illinois, a year earlier, and in response to a growing lynching epidemic, some members of the Niagara movement joined with white liberals to create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, better-known as the NAACP, a key organization in the fight for civil rights for decades to come.

*Members of the Tallahassee, Florida, NAACP youth council gather before a protest march in 1964.*

of fighting for better pay and shorter work weeks, during which union members were harassed, and threatened with losing their jobs, Randolph and the BSCP got the Pullman Company to the negotiating table and in August 1937 the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters signed a contract, officially becoming the first black union to be recognized by a major company.

## THE GREAT BLACK MIGRATION AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

LOOKING TO ESCAPE THE VIOLENCE OF the South, as well as a better life, tens of thousands of African-Americans migrated North to cities such as Chicago (whose black population grew from 44,000 in 1910 to 110,000 in 1920) and



## JESSE OWENS WINS GOLD AT THE BERLIN OLYMPICS; JOE LOUIS KNOCKS OUT MAX SCHMELING 1936 AND 1938

IN JUNE 1936 GERMAN HEAVYWEIGHT BOXER Max Schmeling bested champion Joe Louis in a match that, in the world's eyes, pitted Adolf Hitler's Third Reich against the United States. Although Schmeling himself was never a member of the Nazi party, and wanted nothing to do with the propaganda, he was celebrated in the German press as a hero who proved the superiority of the Aryan race. Louis' defeat was a particular blow to African-Americans ("I walked down Seventh Avenue and saw grown men weeping like children, and women sitting on the curbs with their head in their hands. All across the country that night when the news came that Joe was knocked out, people cried," wrote Langston Hughes.) Two months later, runner Jesse Owens, and nine other African-American athletes (there were a total of 18 black American athletes) won 14 out of the 56 medals at the 1936

*Jesse Owens competes in the long jump at the Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, 1936. At right: Joe Louis pummels Max Schmeling in a rematch at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, 1938.*

Olympics in Berlin. Despite the fact that, in the end, the Germans medaled most, the victories of the African-Americans, particularly that of Owens, who won 4 gold medals, put the lie to the idea of Aryan superiority.

Griped a Nazi newspaper: "If the American team had not brought along Black auxiliaries . . . one would have regarded the Yankees as the biggest disappointment of the Games." Along with the African-Americans, 13 athletes of Jewish descent also won medals.

Two years later Joe Louis would destroy Max Schmeling in two minutes and four seconds in front of a sold-out crowd at Yankee Stadium. Longtime *Miami Herald* columnist Edwin Pope later wrote, "Joe Louis was more than a symbol. He was a walking, living, punching demonstration that a black man could do just about anything he set out to do in this country if he had the goods."

New York, where they flooded into Harlem. Among the new arrivals were artists, writers, and intellectuals—Hughes himself, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer. Many found a forum for their work in *Survey Graphic*, a journal edited in 1925 by the scholar Alain Locke, which boldly heralded the coming of the "new Negro" who would not be influenced or defined by stereotypes or his slave past but would define himself. The Renaissance ended with the onset of the Great De-

pression, but had made an undeniable, and indelible mark on American culture.

## PRESIDENT JOHNSON AND VOTING RIGHTS 1964

IN THE WAKE OF CRITICISM BY SOME CIVIL rights leaders, who believed, despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that the president had been moving too slowly on civil rights, Pres. Lyndon Johnson spoke before full congress on March 5, 1965, stating "we cannot, and we must

not wait another eight months before we get a bill. We have already waited 100 years and more and the time for waiting is gone. . . . It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome." In retrospect, his words and actions may not seem so revolutionary. But coming from a white son of the

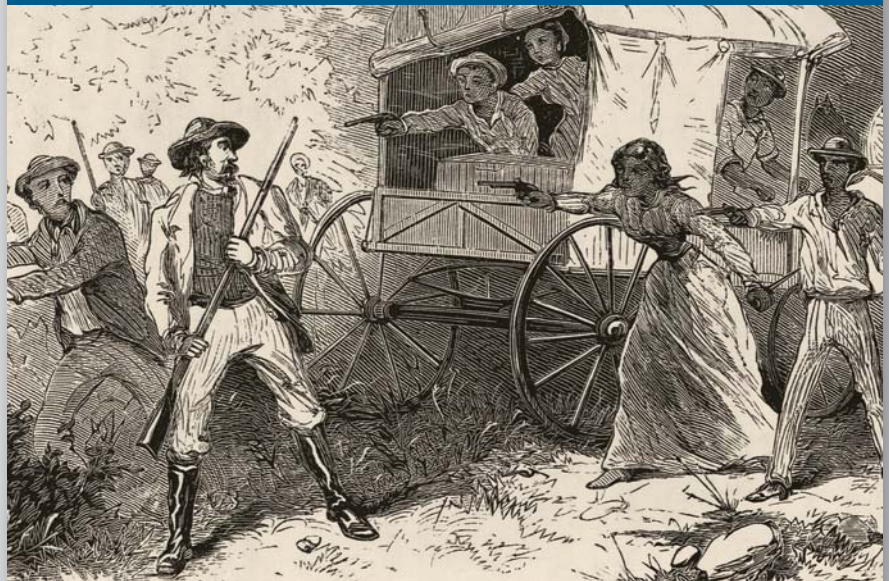
greatness stuck deeply in the craw of Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul of France and the most powerful man in that nation. But more to the point, Napoleon wanted Saint-Domingue restored to France and he wanted to re-establish slavery and its riches. So L'Ouverture was tricked into capture and carried across the Atlantic in June 1802 to be imprisoned in France. His successor, Gen. Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his army, which matched Gen. Napoleon Bonaparte and his army in ferocity and determination, proved too difficult to defeat. The French surrendered in November 1803. Napoleon lost nearly 60,000 men to conflict and yellow fever, Dessalines about 12,000.

The slaves gained their freedom, and the United States gained a massive amount of land, when in the same year, Napoleon was forced to cut his losses—he had no need for land in North America without the jewel of Saint-Domingue, and the war had cost him dearly. He sold the Louisiana territory, more than 800,000 square miles of land stretching from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, to the United States for \$15 million (\$250,000,000 in today's currency).

## THE AME CHURCH IS FOUNDED

FOR 20 YEARS, STARTING IN 1786, THE African-American minister Rev. Richard Allen struggled with white Methodist church leaders to create a separate black church to “worship God under our own vine and fig tree,” as Allen wrote in his memoir. Along with Allen in the struggle was another Methodist minister, Absalom Jones. Both Jones and Allen led their black congregation in a walkout from St. George's Methodist Church after being told that, as black, they had to sit in the back of the sanctuary. Jones formed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in 1792 and was ordained in 1804, becoming the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church. Allen, who had refused the pastorate at St. Thomas, founded Moth-

## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD 1830s TO 1865



THE ASSISTING OF RUNAWAY SLAVES APPEARS TO HAVE BEGUN at the end of the eighteenth century when Quakers began forming groups for just such a purpose. By the early 1830s, the “Underground Railroad” as it was called had grown into a vast network of safe houses (stations or depots) run by stationmasters such as the Philadelphia abolitionist William Still, and the Indiana Quakers Levi and Catherin Coffin—who helped between 2,000 and 3,000 enslaved to freedom—and secret routes along which conductors such as Harriet Tubman guided some 300 out of slavery. Estimates as to the number of people who gained freedom via the Underground Railroad range from 40,000 to 100,000.

*Fugitive slaves fight off their pursuers in an engraving from William Still's book **The Underground Railroad.***

er Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, which gained its autonomy with a Pennsylvania supreme court ruling in 1816. African-Americans had gotten out from under the control of white church authorities in the North to create places of worship and community that would welcome first ex-slaves, and then blacks migrating from the South, providing them aid, assistance and a place to worship freely.

## THE GERMAN COAST UPRISING 1811

ON JANUARY 8, 1811, 25 SLAVES ON THE plantation of a Col. Manuel Andry, attacked Andry and his son with an ax, killing the son. Led by a mulatto slave

named Charles Deslondes, the other slaves on the plantation, situated in the German Coast region of Louisiana, about 35 miles north of New Orleans, rose up. Joined by free people of color and maroons, a community of runaways living in the swamps, the revolt to include between 180 to 500 rebels. They marched through the countryside, destroying property, intent on reaching New Orleans. By the next day, local militiamen confronted the rebels, who fled into the woods. In the end, 76 insurgents were killed in battle or executed, their heads displayed on posts.

The uprising had been a failure, but it sent shockwaves throughout Louisiana and the south. White landowners lived in fear of more of the same, recalling the Haitian revolution that had ended