



United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Coast Guard History Program

African-Americans in Coast Guard History

Historical Chronology



1831

- The Treasury Department ruled that the Revenue Service could employ free persons of color on board cutters as part of the crew.

1865

- Abraham Lincoln commissioned Michael A. Healy as a Third Lieutenant in the Revenue Service of the United States. He signed the commission on 4 March 1865. Healy was the first African-American commissioned into the Revenue Service, the forerunner of today's Coast Guard. However, during his lifetime he was never "recognized as a person of color."

1870s

- African-American keepers were assigned to the Upper Cedar Point Light Station in Maryland.

1876

- On 1 March 1876 African-American Surfman Jeremiah Munden went in harm's way as part of the Outer Banks' Jones Hill Station crew attempting to rescue the crew of the grounded Italian bark *Nuova Ottavia*. All of the surfmen were killed when the Italian ship's crew scrambled onto the surfboat and capsized it in very heavy surf. Munden and the rest of the Jones Hill men were the first U.S. Life-Saving Servicemen to die in the line of duty and Munden became first African-American Coast Guardsman to give his life in a rescue case.

1877

- First Lieutenant Michael Healy was appointed as the commanding officer of the Revenue Cutter *Chandler*. He was the first African-American to command a vessel of the United States Government.

1880

- Richard Etheridge was appointed Keeper of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station, the first African-American to command a major U.S. Government installation.

1898

- Congress awarded the crew of the Revenue Cutter *Hudson*, including Steward's Mate Savage and Cook Moses Jones, both African-Americans, a bronze medal for their actions in saving the Navy destroyer USS *Winslow* during a battle of the Spanish American War off Cuba.

1915

- Lewis S. Wescott was the Officer-in-Charge of Station Pea Island when the U.S. Life-Saving Service merged with the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service to create the Coast Guard, making Wescott the first African-American to command a Coast Guard shore facility.

1920

- Clarence Samuels, an African-American, enlisted in the Coast Guard as a Seaman, Second Class. Samuels established a number of firsts during his 27-year career in the Coast Guard.

1928

- BM1c Clarence Samuels assumed command of Coast Guard Patrol Boat *AB-15*, becoming the first African-American to command a Coast Guard vessel since Michael Healy.
- BMC George E. Pruden was the Officer-in-Charge at Station Pea Island.

1929

- Boatswain's Mate, First Class Clarence Samuels was appointed a Chief Quartermaster.

1939

- On 12 May 1939 Alex Haley enlisted in the Coast Guard.
- 12 May 1939: Boatswain's Mate First Class Clarence Samuels was appointed as a Chief Photographer's Mate (Acting), becoming the first African-American Photographer in the Coast Guard.

1942

- March, 1942: The Coast Guard recruited its first 150 black volunteers, who underwent basic training at Manhattan Beach, New York. Over 5,000 African-Americans served as Coast Guardsmen in WWII, about 965 of whom were petty or warrant officers.
- May, 1942: The Coast Guard began enlisting African-Americans to serve in capacities other than the rates of Stewardmate or Messman. The first recognized Coast Guardsman to make the switch was Oliver T. Henry. He served as a Steward aboard USCGC *Northland* on the Greenland Patrol but was a recognized and accomplished mechanic. He requested a transfer of rating and successfully made the transition to Motor Machinist's Mate while aboard *Northland*.

1943

- In February, 1943, Louis C. Etheridge, Jr. and an all African-American gun crew on board the USCGC *Campbell* played a key role in sinking the German submarine U-606. Etheridge was later awarded a Bronze Star and a Letter of Commendation from the Commandant for his heroic actions.
- On 14 April 1943 Joseph C. Jenkins graduated as Ensign in the Coast Guard Reserve, becoming the first recognized commissioned African-American officer in the Coast Guard and the first to graduate from Officer Candidate School at the Coast Guard Academy.
- On 1 June 1943, the U.S. Coast Guard promoted Warrant Officer Clarence Samuels to Lieutenant, Junior Grade, making him the first African-American officer to reach that rank in the Coast Guard.
- In December 1943, USS *Sea Cloud* became the first fully integrated warship (officers and enlisted) of the U.S. Fleet while under the command of Carleton Skinner. The warship remained in commission through 1945.
- Stewardmate Jacob Lawrence, a noted and respected artist before the war, served aboard USS *Sea Cloud*. He was formally appointed as a Combat Artist, becoming the first African-American to serve in such a capacity. He published his first painting, *Another Patrol*, from his *War Series* Collection in 1946.

1944

- Lieutenant, Junior Grade Clarence Samuels became the first African-American to command a "major" ship since Michael Healy and the first to achieve command during wartime when he assumed command of the *Light Vessel No. 115*.
- On 27 September 1944 Clarence Samuels was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. After the war he reverted back to the enlisted ranks and retired as a Chief Boatswain's Mate in 1947.

1945

- First five African-American females entered the SPARs: Olivia Hooker, D. Winifred Byrd, Julia Mosley, Yvonne Cumberbatch, and Aileen Cooke.

1948

- President Harry Truman ordered the integration of the armed forces of the United States with Executive Order 9981, signed 26 July 1948. By this time the Coast Guard had already opened up all of its rates to all qualified persons regardless of race. The Coast Guard noted "the importance of selecting men for what they are, for what they are capable of doing, and insisting on good conduct, good behavior, and good qualities of leadership for all hands. . . .As a matter of policy Negro recruits receive the same consideration as all others."

1955

- Jarvis Wright, Jr., became the first African-American to be appointed to the Coast Guard Academy. Due to health reasons, he was unable to graduate.

1956

- James W. Parks became the first Coast Guard African-American Chief Gunner's Mate when he was advanced to GMC on 1 November 1956 and the first Senior Chief Gunner's Mate on 1 April 1965. He retired from the Coast Guard after twenty years honorable service in 1967.

1957

- Bobby C. Wilks became the first African American Coast Guard aviator (Coast Guard Aviator No. 735). He later became the first African American to reach the rank of Captain and the first to command a Coast Guard air station. He accumulated over 6,000 flight hours in 18 different types of aircraft. He was also the project officer for the Sikorsky HH-3 helicopter when they were first delivered in the 1960s.

1961

- During his inaugural parade, President John F. Kennedy noticed that there were no African-Americans in the Coast Guard Academy cadet unit marching in the parade. He told his speechwriter, Richard Goodwin, "That's not acceptable. Something ought to be done about it." Goodwin called Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon the next day and Dillon ordered the Academy "to scrutinize the Academy's recruitment policy to make sure it did not discriminate against blacks." [As quoted in Nicholas Bryant's *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 211-212.]

1962

- In 1962 YNC (CRXI) Frank Cook Sanders became the first African-American to be selected as a Coast Guard Intelligence and Law Enforcement Agent. In 1968 he was designated as a Marine Investigating Officer while serving with MIO San Francisco. Chief Sanders retired in from the Coast Guard in 1968 and went on to another distinguished career, this time with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, retiring in 1988.
- Coast Guard veteran Harvey C. Russell, Jr. became the first African-American to break the corporate color barrier when he became Vice President of Corporate Planning for Pepsi.

1963

- John G. Witherspoon first enlisted in the Coast Guard. During his distinguished career he rose to the rank of Captain and established a number of historic African-American "firsts." The Coast Guard's *Captain John G. Witherspoon Inspirational Leadership Award* is named in his honor.

1966

- Merle Smith became the first African-American to graduate from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

1972

- In July 1972 LT London Steverson, the Coast Guard Academy's second African-American graduate, became the chief of the newly formed Minority Recruiting Section in the Washington, D.C. During his assignment as Chief of the Minority Recruiting Section he led the largest minority officer recruiting effort (recorded at the time) by recruiting more than 50 minority Coast Guard Academy cadets in a two-year period from 1973 to 1974.

1974

- Allen L. Thompson, Jr. graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. His son, Allen L. Thompson, III graduated from the Academy in 1998. They were the first African-American father and son graduates of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.
- Samuel E. Burton was the first African-American lawyer in the Coast Guard. He began his service as a Direct-Commission Lieutenant on 10 July 1974 and retired as a Captain.

1975

- On 5 June 1975 ENS Thomasania Montgomery and ENS Linda Rodriguez graduated from Coast Guard Officer Candidate School, Yorktown, VA, thereby becoming the first African-American female commissioned officers in the Coast Guard.

1976

- Cheryl Avery became the Coast Guard's first African-American female lawyer.
- SK1 Magdalene Cobb, who enlisted in the Coast Guard Reserve/SPARS in 1974, set up the first data base for Buoys and Day boards for the 8th Coast Guard District in 1976. She was also the first woman programmer in AMVER New York 1978 and has been credited for setting up the first computer system for Support Center New York.

1977

- Bobby C. Wilks became the first African-American Coast Guardsmen to be promoted to the rank of Captain.
- Seaman Wanda Jeffries became the first African-American woman to be permanently assigned to and serve aboard a Coast Guard cutter when she was assigned to the CGC *Morgenthau* in October 1977. A total of twenty-four women (20 enlisted, 4 officers) were assigned sea duty that year aboard *Morgenthau* and *Gallatin*, a first in CG history.

1978

- Manson K. Brown became the first African-American to command the cadet brigade at the Coast Guard Academy.

1979

- MK2 Ralph Berry becomes the first African-American Coast Guard male to graduate from the Navy Dive and Salvage Center in Panama, Florida.
- SN Zorenia B. Simmons was the first African-American female to work as a Coast Guard Security Officer while stationed at Coast Guard Support Center Boston.
- SN Bonita V. Life was the first African-American female assigned to strike as a Hospital Corpsman while stationed at Coast Guard Support Center Boston.

1980:

- Coast Guard Academy Athletic Director Otto Graham appointed Hallie Gregory, the Academy's assistant track and basketball coach, as the Academy's head track coach, making Gregory the first African-American head coach in the history of the Academy.
- Petty Officer Otis Tukes was the first African-American Coast Guardsman to receive training at the Culinary Institute of America in the Coast Guard's equivalent to the Navy's White House Program of Chef Training and Service.
- Petty Officer Flora E. Randolph was the first African-American female to work in the AMVER center on Governor's Island, NY. She later became the first African-American female assigned at AIRSTA Savannah.

- YN1 Donnie Harris was the first African-American Coast Guard Clerk of the Court.

1981

- On 1 March 1981 Edith S. Brown became the first African-American female to be advanced to E-7.
- SN Cecelia M. (Oakes) Stoutamire became the first African-American woman to be assigned to an icebreaker when she reported aboard CGC *Glacier* in 1981. She also became the first African-American woman to participate in an Operation Deep Freeze cruise while aboard, participating with *Glacier* during Operation Deep Freeze 1981.

1983

- Angela Dennis and Daphne Reese became the first African-American female graduates of the Coast Guard Academy.
- Mr. Walter Somerville became the first African-American member of the Senior Executive Service in the Coast Guard when he assumed the duties of Director of Civil Rights.

1988

- HSCM Clarence Sheffield assumed the mantle of the enlisted (Silver) Ancient Mariner, the enlisted person with the earliest date of qualification as a Cutterman. He was the second man to receive the recognition and the first African-American to be so honored.
- LTJG John T. Broadway became the first African-American Officer-In-Charge of a LEDET when he took command of Group Cape Hatteras LEDET in September, 1988.
- Pamela Autry was promoted to EMC, making her the first African-American woman to advance to D-7 in any of the enlisted engineering ratings.
- CDR Merle Smith and LCDR London Steverson became the first African-American Coast Guard Academy graduates to retire from the Coast Guard. CDR Smith (Class of 1966) was the first African American graduate of the Coast Guard Academy while LCDR Steverson (Class of 1968) was the second African-American graduate of the Academy.

1989

- Cheri Ben-lesau became the first African-American female ASM.

1990

- Then-SK1 Mary Fowlkes, USCGR, was the first African-American woman to deploy to the Middle East during Operation Desert Shield-Desert Storm. She was assigned to PSU 303. She later advanced to SKCM in 2009.

1991

- MCPO Stephen Spencer became the first African-American Command Master Chief in the Coast Guard.
- CWO4 (F&S) Lavonia Bass, USCGR, became the first African-American woman to be promoted to CWO in the Coast Guard Reserve when she was promoted to CWO2 in June, 1991.

1992

- YN1 Yvonne Daniels became the Coast Guard Band's first permanently assigned Vocalist.

1994

- On July 1 1994 Veronica Jones Sharpe retired from active duty after 20 years and 17 days along with Vonetta McKee. They were the first active duty African-American women to retire with 20 years of service.
- First African-American female AE was Diane Perry.

1995

- Doris Hull became the first active duty African-American woman to be promoted to Warrant Officer in the Coast Guard.
- LT Ricky Sharpe became the first African-American commanding officer of a TACLET when he took command of TACLET Gulf. In August 1995, one of his LEDETs, under the command of LTJG Robert Landolfi out of Mobile, seized the F/V *Nataly I* when the team discovered 24,325 pounds of cocaine hidden on board, making this the largest U.S. maritime seizure of cocaine to that date.

1997

- EMCS Pamela Autry became the first African-American woman to be selected as a command senior chief in the Coast Guard.

1998

- Erroll M. Brown became the first African-American Flag officer in the Coast Guard.
- Vincent Patton, III, became the first African-American Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard and the eighth person to serve in that office. He originally enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1972 and served afloat and ashore during his illustrious career. He retired in 2002.
- Allen L. Thompson, III graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. His father, Allen L. Thompson, Jr. graduated from the Academy in 1974. They were the first African-American father and son graduates of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

1999

- YNCS Angela McShan became the first African-American to become an instructor at the Chief Petty Officers' Academy.

2000

- RADM Erroll M. Brown became the first African-American District Commander when he took command of District Thirteen.
- Angela McShan became the first African-American woman to advance to Master Chief.
- Lucille "Pam" Thompson became the First African-American woman to serve as a Coast Guard Special Agent. She served as a Special Agent from July, 2000 to July, 2004.
- GM3 Tajuana Usry became the first African-American woman to receive the Small Arms Instructor (SAI) designation.
- LT Nicole Carter was the first African-American woman officer to receive a permanent Cutterman's Pin.
- Jacqueline James became the first black woman to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy with an engineering degree. "James [was] from St. Vincent and made several contributions in the academic and athletics arenas while a student and later as [a] Civil Engineer at the USCGA."

2001

- ENS Andrea Parker became the first African-American woman to graduate with an engineering degree from the Coast Guard Academy.
- CDR Sharon Donald-Baynes became the first African-American woman to command an operations ashore unit when she took command of Group Lower Mississippi River based in Memphis, Tennessee.

2002

- The YNCM Angela McShan Inspirational Leadership Award was named in Master Chief Angela McShan's honor.

2003

- On 16 May 2003 LT Greg Duncan became the first African-American Coast Guard officer to successfully complete the scuba diver course at the Navy Dive and Salvage Center in Panama, Florida.

2004

- CDR (then-LCDR) Gerard A. Williams, USCG (Ret) became the first African-American to command an MSST when he took command of MSST 91102 (Chesapeake) in 2004.
- LCDR Rhonda Fleming-Makell retired from the Coast Guard. She was the first African-American female Coast Guard officer to earn a 20-year retirement.
- LCDR Louvenia A. McMillan became the first African-American Female Intelligence Officer in 2004; the first African American Female Field Intelligence Support Team Leader that same year; and the first African American Female to hold the Advanced Boat Force Operations Insignia in 2007.
- Lisa Spotwood became the first African-American female Master Chief Food Service Specialist when she was advanced to E-9 in August, 2004.

2005

- On 24 June 2005 LTJG Jeanine McIntosh-Menze was awarded her wings at a ceremony at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, after completing training there. She was the first African-American female Coast Guard aviator.

2006

- DCCM Amritt A. Villa assumed the 7th Silver Mariner title in 2006, making him the second African-American Silver Mariner.
- CWO2 Apple G. Pryor, assigned as the Main Propulsion Assistant onboard the CGC *Boutwell*, was the first African-American female Naval Engineering Chief Warrant Officer of the Coast Guard.
- LT Rachel Lewis was the first African-American female officer to serve aboard USCGB *Eagle* as Command Cadre (Operations Officer), 2006-2008.

2007

- Then-BM1 Malia Chasteen became the first African-American woman Executive Petty Officer, afloat or ashore, when she was assigned as XPO aboard CGC *Pike*. *Pike* was homeported in San Francisco, California.
- On 1 February, 2007 Glenda Smith-Leeth became the first African-American female active-duty Master Chief Storekeeper.
- Mary Cunningham became the first African-American female and the first active-duty female to make Chief Damage Controlman when she was advanced from DC1 to DCC on 1 August 2007. She was advanced to Senior Chief in 2012.

- LCDR Louvenia A. McMillan became the first African-American female to hold the Advanced Boat Force Operations Insignia.
- On 25 September 2007 AMT2 Katrina Cooley became the first African-American female HH-65 Flight Mechanic.

2008

- CDR Adrian L. West assumed command of Maritime Safety and Security Team (MSST) Galveston on 7 August 2008, becoming the second and currently only African-American to command an MSST.
- On 30 June 2008 Petty Officer Randall W. Purdy was selected to serve as the first African-American Dropmaster/Loadmaster Examiner for the HC-130H Standardization Team attaining the highest aircrew designation in Coast Guard aviation.
- Ensign DeCarol Davis was Valedictorian of the Coast Guard Academy Class of 2008. She was the first African-American female to earn that honor.

2009

- LT Felicia Thomas took command of the CGC *Pea Island* on 19 June 2009, thereby becoming the first African-American female Commanding Officer of a Coast Guard cutter.
- LT Carrie Wolfe and LT Olivia Grant became the first African-American female Engineering Officers on a major cutter when they reported aboard the CGC *Spencer* and CGC *Venturous* respectively in the summer of 2009.
- LTJG Miguel Augustin was recognized as the 2009 Leon Y. McGaughey Adult Military Learner of the Year by the Commission on Military Education and Training, the first member of the U.S. Coast Guard and the first African-American Coast Guardsman to receive this award. He also received an honorable mention as the 2009 Coast Guard Collateral Duty Education Service Officer of the Year.
- SKCM Mary Fowlkes was the first African-American female to reach SKCM in the Coast Guard Reserves.
- Cadet 1/c Jacqueline Fitch became the first African-American female Regimental Commander at the Coast Guard Academy.

2010

- Manson K. Brown became the first African-American Vice Admiral and the first Area Commander when he was promoted to Vice Admiral and given command of the Pacific Area.
- On 9 April 2010 LTJG La'Shanda Holmes became the first African-American female helicopter pilot in the Coast Guard.
- On 10 July 2010 Otis E. Harris, Jr., was appointed as the Coast Guard's first African-American Special Agent-In-Charge. He was assigned to the Chesapeake Region, Portsmouth, VA.
- AMT2 Katrina Cooley became the first African-American female Drop Master.

2013

- OSCM Adowa Hendricks became the first African-American female Master Chief Petty Officer in the Operations Specialty Rating (as of 1 April 2013).
- CDR Michelle Renee Watson became the first African-American female to command a PSU.
- CDR Lexia Littlejohn became the first African-American female Coast Guard Academy graduate to reach the rank of O-5 when she was promoted on 1 August 2013.

2014

- On 1 September 2014, GMC Tajuana Usry became the first African-American female Chief Gunnersmate.

2015

- RADM Erica Schwartz became the first African-American flag officer of the U.S. Public Health Service to serve in the Coast Guard.
- On 1 March 2015 Nicole M. Carter was the first African-American female Coast Guard Academy alumni/graduate to retire from the Coast Guard.
- On 12 March 2015 former SPAR Dr. Olivia J. Hooker became the first female African-American to have a Coast Guard facility named in her honor.
- On 6 May 2015 CAPT Lucinda Cunningham became the first female African-American to be promoted to the rank of Captain.

2016

- On 8 July 2016 CDR Zeita Merchant took command of Marine Safety Unit Chicago, becoming the first African-American female to command a Prevention/Marine Safety Unit/Office.
- OSCM Adowa Hendricks became the first African-American female to be selected to a District Command Master Chief (Gold Badge) position, becoming the Command Master Chief of the 5th Coast Guard District.
- YNCM Rashaun Morris, USCGR, became the first African-American female to be selected as Reserve Command Master Chief. She was the Reserve Command Master Chief for the First Coast Guard District.

2017

- BMC Malia Chasteen took command of CGC *Tackle* in Rockland, Maine, becoming the first African-American female to become an Officer-In-Charge of either an afloat or ashore unit.
- LTJG Tiarra McDonald became the first African-American female Cyber Officer in the Coast Guard.

2018

- The Coast Guard awarded the CAPT DAVID H. JARVIS Award to CDR Zeita Merchant. She was the first African-American female to win this prestigious award.
 - CMC Adwoa Hendricks became the first African-American female CMC Area Gold Badge.
 - The Coast Guard Academy Class of 2018 graduated its largest group of African American graduates (18) in history on May 23, 2018.
 - The Coast Guard Academy Class of 2018 graduated its largest group of African American Women (5) in history on May 23, 2018.
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ADDENDUM

- CWO Melvin W. Williams, Jr., USCG (Ret) was the first African-American male to make Chief in the rate of then-Aviation Survivalman (ASM) and then from ASMC to Chief Warrant Officer (CWO2) before retiring. While serving as an ASM1 he was credited with the development of the Float Strobe Light. He was the first African-American male to make parachute jumps at NAS Lakehurst while undergoing Parachute Rigger training in the CG transition of combining CG Aviation Ordnanceman with CG Aviation Parachute Rigger, performed three CPRs, rigged, loaded and dropped the ADAPT system, nighttime helo rescue of two missing divers with the aid of the Night Sun CGAS Miami. He was awarded the Sikorsky Winged "S" on 23 February 1974 for rescues flying in CG HH-52s stationed at CG Air Station Miami.
- CAPT Joseph H. Jones, USCG: First African-American to Pre-Com a cutter -- PRECOMDET NEAH BAY -- Portsmouth, VA; First African-American to command a 140-foot ice breaking tug in the Great Lakes --- NEAH BAY; First African-American to command a 210-foot Medium Endurance Cutter --

CGC RELIANCE in New Castle, NH; First African-American to Command a 378-foot High Endurance Cutter -- CGC DALLAS in New York, NY. Also, he had command of three cutters, XO, OPS, DWO -- assigned to 6 cutters: OWASCO -- HEC; VIGOROUS --WMEC; NEAH BAY -- WTGB; UNIMAK -- WHEC; RELIANCE -- WMEC; DALLAS -- WHEC; First African-American to be assigned as Executive Assistant to an Assistant Commandant; First African-American to be assigned as the chief of operations of a CG District; First African-American tactics officer at the USCGA; First O-6 CG-man in the Defense Attaché System; First African-American as an attaché in Liberia -- (where I also served although I [CAPT Jones] served in the Security Assistance part of the Mil Mission there).

- In 2015 LCDR Lee Stenson became the first African-American to achieve World Tae Kwon Do Federation Master Instructor level in Tae Kwon Do while serving on active duty with the Coast Guard.

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