

# Black History Month



Herman Johnson

(1916 - 2004)

Dorothy Johnson

(1916 - 2004)

Herman and Dorothy Johnson achieved success in numerous endeavors while contributing to institutions and causes that strengthened the social and economic interests of the African-American community. Herman Johnson, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, was a graduate of Cornell University. An entrepreneur with interests in real estate appraisal, insurance, and other ventures, he also was president of the Kansas City branch of the NAACP and served in the Missouri Legislature. Dorothy Johnson was the first black woman member of Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Kansas, where she earned degrees in journalism and social work. A journalist with *The Kansas City Call*, she also held leadership positions with the Urban League of Kansas City. Both were among the co-founders of the Local Investment Commission.

# Black History Month



**Florynce R. Kennedy**  
(1916 - 2000)

Florynce Rae Kennedy was a civil rights attorney and feminist activist. Her controversial tactics and provocative tone drew criticism, but also helped publicize national debates on abortion, racism in the media, women's equality, and consumer protection. Kennedy became one of the first African-American women to graduate from Columbia University's law school. She represented activists such as H. Rap Brown and members of the Black Panthers as well as the estates of Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker against record companies that had withheld royalties. Kennedy later became an integral part of the feminist movement beginning in the 1970s. She toured the country on the lecture circuit, often with friend and fellow activist Gloria Steinem, while continuing to lead protests, including a rally outside the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York.



# Black History Month



**Bettye Miller**  
(1928 - 1977)

**Milt Abel**  
(1928 - 2006)

Bettye Miller and Milt Abel, a husband and wife musical duo, reigned over the Kansas City jazz scene from the 1950s through the 1970s. Miller and Abel first met in 1953 at the Horseshoe Lounge at 32nd St. and Troost Ave. where they continued to perform regularly for 10 years. They went on to entertain audiences at other venues locally and nationally. After Miller’s death in 1977, Abel continued to perform for nearly 30 years, sometimes accompanied by his son from his second marriage, Milton, Jr., or Miller’s daughter from her first marriage, Bettyejo.

# Black History Month

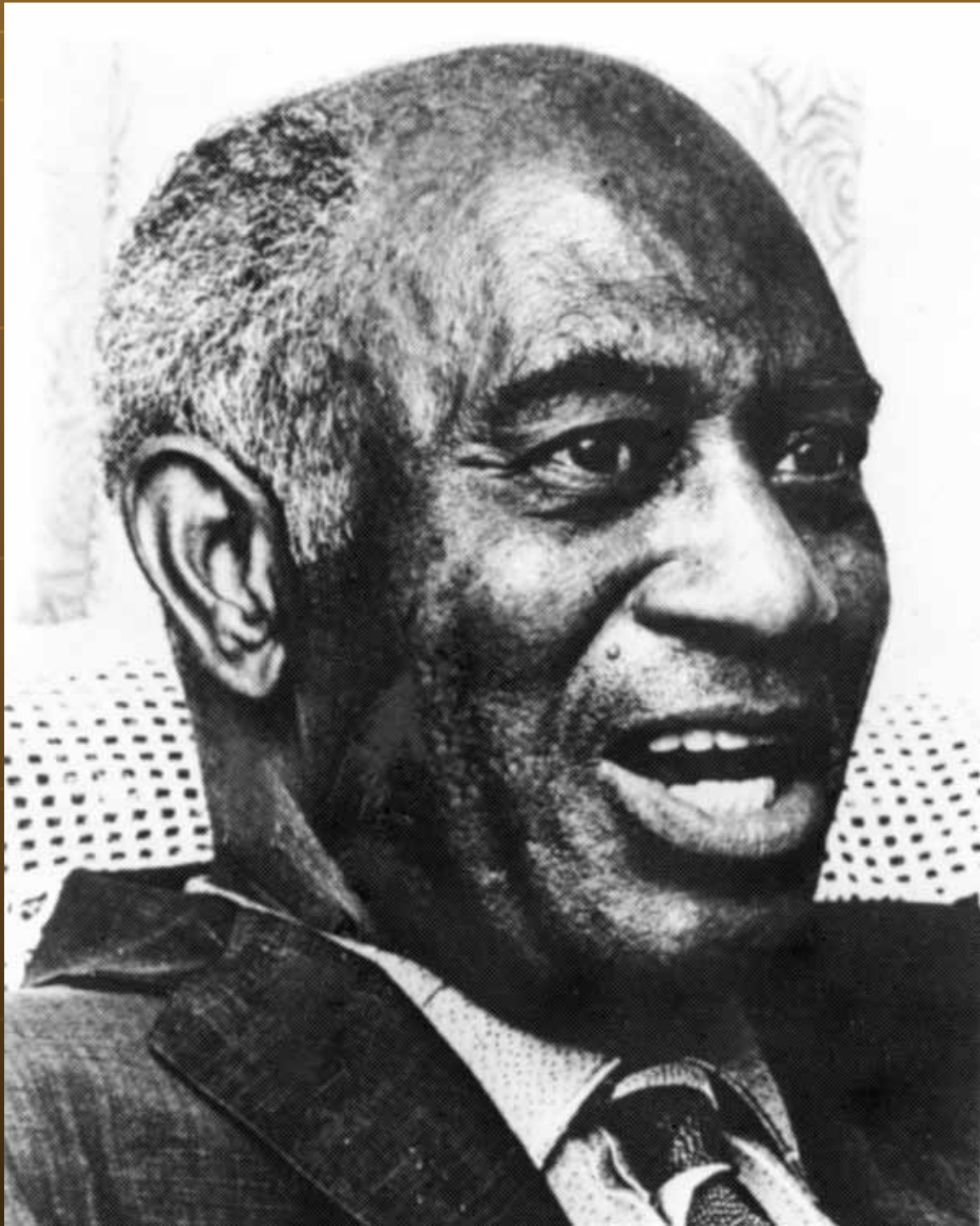


**Bernard Powell**  
(1947 - 1979)

Bernard Powell was a leader in local and national efforts to end racial discrimination and increase the political and economic power of African Americans. Powell joined the NAACP at 13, and after graduating from Central High School in 1965, joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Selma-to-Montgomery March. He later became regional director of the Congress of Racial Equality. In the wake of the April 1968 assassination of Dr. King, Powell established the Social Action Committee of 20 (SAC-20) to provide leadership skills to young African Americans. For these and similar endeavors, he received many honors including the Jefferson Award for Public Service. Powell was shot to death in 1979 at age 32. The Bernard Powell Memorial, a life-sized bronze statue within a fountain in Spring Valley Park, commemorates his life and legacy.



# Black History Month



**Melvin B. Tolson**  
(1898 - 1966)

Melvin B. Tolson became the first Poet Laureate of the Republic of Liberia. Born in Moberly, Mo., Tolson spent his junior and senior years at Kansas City's Lincoln High School. He later studied at Fisk University, Lincoln University in Oxford, Pa., and Columbia University. From 1923-1947, Tolson taught English, directed plays and coached the debate team at Wiley College in Marshall, Tex. In 1935, his team beat the defending national champions from the University of Southern California, a victory that became the basis for the 2008 Denzel Washington movie *The Great Debaters*. In 1944, Tolson published his first collection of poetry, the well-received *Rendezvous with America*. He also wrote *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, and *Harlem Gallery*.

# Black History Month

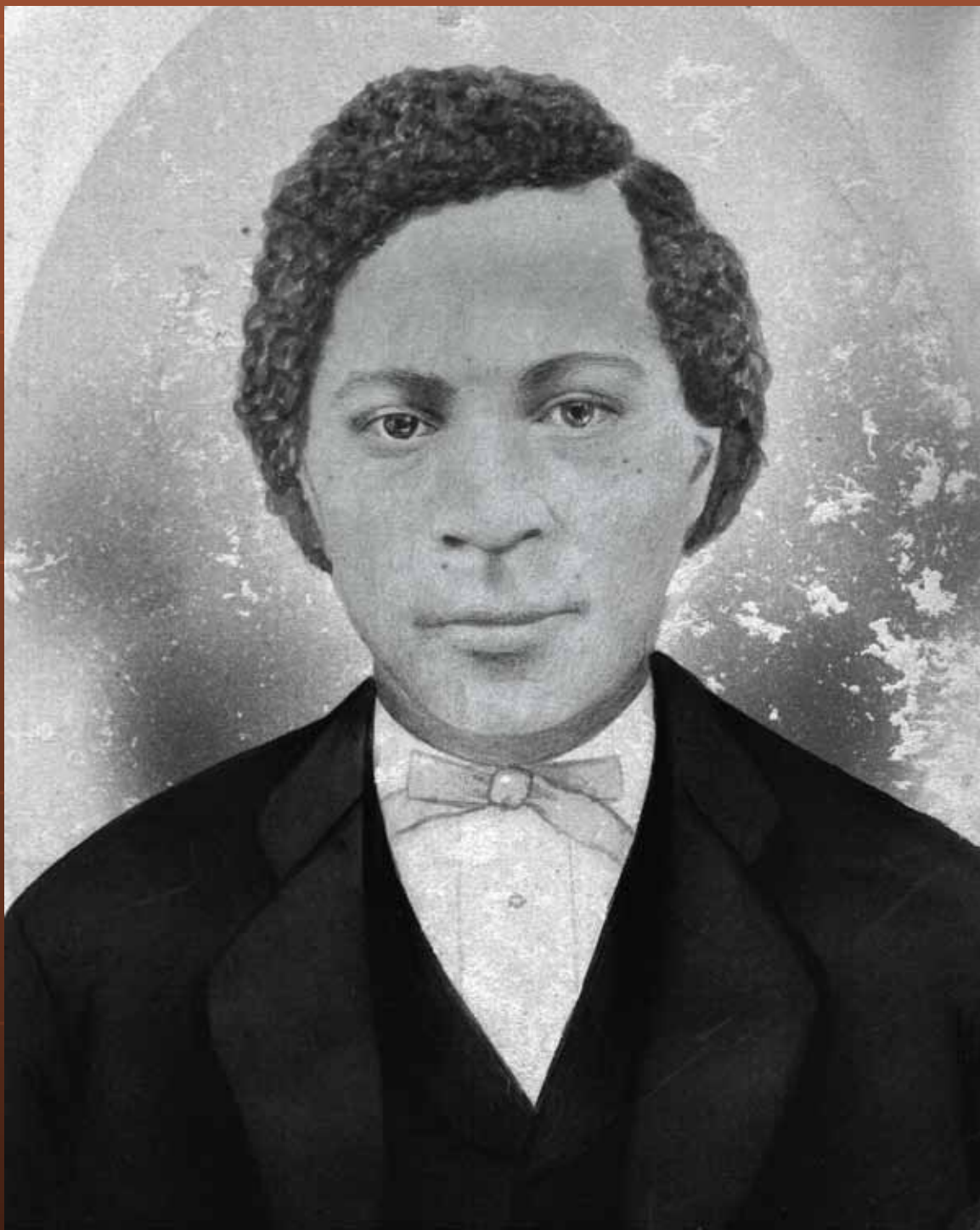


**Bruce R. Watkins**  
(1924 - 1980)

Bruce R. Watkins was an entrepreneur, public official, and community leader. Born Bruce Riley in Parkville, Mo., Watkins was adopted by his mother's second husband, Theron B. Watkins, co-founder of Watkins Brothers Funeral Home. During World War II, he served with the Tuskegee Airmen, the renowned African-American combat aviators. After the war, Watkins joined the family business, where he played an integral role for 30 years. In 1966, Watkins became the first African American elected to the City Council, where he served two terms. He also was twice elected Jackson County circuit clerk and ran for mayor of Kansas City in 1979. His legacy is memorialized by Bruce R. Watkins Drive and Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, as well as the Spirit of Freedom Fountain that celebrates the contributions of Kansas City's African-American community.



# Black History Month



**Hiram Young**  
(1812 - 1882)

Hiram Young was born about 1812 in Tennessee. In 1847, Young obtained freedom and with his wife moved to Independence, Mo. Taking advantage of his location near the Oregon and Santa Fe trails, he built wagons for western emigrants. By 1860, Young was turning out thousands of yokes and between eight and nine hundred wagons a year. As Civil War tensions mounted along the Kansas-Missouri border, Young and his family fled to Fort Leavenworth, Ks., in 1861. He returned to Independence at the war's end to find his business sacked and destroyed. Nevertheless, Young succeeded in building a school for African-American children in Independence. Trying without success to recoup the losses he had suffered during the war, Young died in 1882. This purportedly is an image of Young and matches his general physical description. No other historic images are known to exist.

*Image courtesy: Jackson County Historical Society*