

250 YEARS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN INNOVATION IN STEM

INFINITE CALCULATIONS



Thomas Jennings
Pioneering Inventor and Entrepreneur, b. 1790s

In 1821, he became the first African American to receive a U.S. patent—for a dry-cleaning process he called “dry scouring.” A tailor by trade, Jennings used the profits from his invention to support abolitionist causes and civil rights efforts in New York. He was a leader in his community and a vocal advocate for the freedom and education of African Americans.

An alleged photo of Thomas Jennings



Lyda Newman
Creative Inventor, b. 1890s

In 1898, she received a U.S. patent for a new and improved hairbrush design using synthetic bristles and a removable compartment for easy cleaning. Her invention made hair care more sanitary and efficient, particularly for African American women. Newman was also a known advocate for women's suffrage, fighting for civil rights alongside her technical achievements.



David Blackwell
Groundbreaking Statistician, b. 1919

In 1965, he became the first African American scholar inducted into the National Academy of Sciences. His work in game theory, probability, and decision theory shaped modern economics, cryptography, and decision theory. He served as chair of the mathematics department at Howard University. Later, despite facing racial barriers, Blackwell became the first African American tenured professor at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2012, he was posthumously awarded the National Medal of Science.

As America marks its 250th year and our Black History Calendar celebrates 40 years, we honor a legacy of Black excellence in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. From labs to classrooms, African American innovators shattered boundaries despite systemic exclusion—helping define not only what is possible, but who belongs.

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Euphemia Lofton Haynes
Distinguished Mathematician, b. 1890

In 1943, she became the first African American woman in the United States to earn a doctorate in mathematics. A lifelong educator and advocate, Dr. Haynes spent decades teaching in Washington, D.C.'s public schools including M Street High School (now Dunbar High School) and the University of the District of Columbia where she established the mathematics department. She later served as the first woman to chair the D.C. Board of Education. Haynes used her position to fight for equitable education and desegregation.



Shirley Ann Jackson
Trailblazing Physicist and Leader, b. 1946

A native Washingtonian and valedictorian graduate of Roosevelt High School, she became the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—in theoretical physics—in 1973. Her research in telecommunications laid the foundation for innovations like touch-tone phones, fiber optics, and caller I.D. Dr. Jackson went on to lead the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and later served as the first woman and first African American president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.



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