

A Dream Deferred: 50 Years of Blacks in Mathematics

Edray Herber Goins

In January 1969, the American Mathematical Society hosted the annual Joint Mathematics Meetings in New Orleans, Louisiana. As Everett Pitcher [2, pg. 37] writes: “[T]here were 4,811 registrants, including 3,084 members of the Society. This was the time when there was a sudden increase in the number of new PhD’s and the foment in the employment market as well as the pleasant location contributed to the size of this meeting.” By comparison, the 2018 annual meeting in San Diego, California saw 5,572 registrants—and probably for the same two reasons.

This meeting began at the end of a tumultuous year in the United States. In December 1968, the Apollo 8 orbited the Moon and photographed “Earthrise.” In November 1968, Nixon was elected President. In June 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated. This year was particularly poignant for African Americans: In October 1968, African American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised black-gloved fists in solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement as they received their medals at the Summer Olympics. In April 1968, Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act—but Martin Luther King was assassinated just the week before, sparking riots throughout the country. It should come as no surprise that African Americans felt it was time to empower Black mathematicians traveling to the 1969 Joint Math Meetings.

Just getting to the Joint Math Meetings as an African American was an adventure in itself. It was notoriously difficult for Black Americans to travel throughout the United States at the time: Jim Crow Laws made it legal for Blacks to be discriminated against for staying at hotels, using restrooms, and obtaining repairs on vehicles. So much so, that in 1936, New York City mailman Victor Green published a guidebook for African American drivers to let them know which lodgings, businesses, and gas stations would serve them along the drive. The *Negro Motorist Green Book*, published for 30 years, was in wide circulation through 1966. I remember growing up hearing stories from my parents about how they moved across the country from Texas

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to California by car in the 1940s, and flipping through the Green Book when I was younger.

Several African Americans came together at the Joint Math Meetings in New Orleans to do something about the plight of Black mathematicians. Encouraged by the Civil Rights Movement and the strides gained in 1968, seventeen individuals met on January 26, 1969: James Ashley Donaldson, Samuel Horace Douglas, Henry Madison Eldridge, Thyrsa Anne Frazier Svager, Richard J. Griego, Johnny L. Houston, Curtis Jefferson, Vivienne Malone-Mayes, Theodore Portis, Arbelig Rodriguez, Charles Smith, Robert S. Smith, Beauregard Stubblefield, Henry Taggart, Walter Talbot, Harriet R. Junior Walton, and Scott Warner Williams. These individuals formed the National Association of Mathematicians, with the charge “to promote excellence in the mathematical sciences and to promote the mathematical development of under-represented American minorities.” More information can be found in Johnny Houston’s book [1].



Left to Right: Leon Woodson, Duane Cooper, Roselyn Williams, Edray Goins, Johnny Houston, Sylvia Bozeman, and Robert Bozeman at the Joint Math Meetings in 2015.

Since the founding of NAM 50 years ago, there have been many changes. The National Science Foundation (NSF) states [3] that in 1968 there were 22,937 doctorates awarded in the United States across all disciplines, with 971 in mathematics and computer science. Just 9 of those went to African American mathematicians. In 2016, there were 3,957 doctorates granted in mathematics and computer science, but just 78 went to African American mathematicians. While the percentage of Blacks receiving doctorates in the mathematical sciences has doubled in the past 50 years—from 0.93% to 1.97%—this is a far cry from 12%, the percentage of Blacks living in the United States.

At the 2019 Joint Mathematics Meetings, I will expand more on these stories and more. We take a tour of the mathematics done by Africans and African Americans over

the past 50 years since the founding of NAM, weaving in personal stories and questions for reflection for the next 50 years.

References

- [1] Johnny L Houston, *The History of the National Association of Mathematicians (NAM): The first thirty (30) years, 1969–1999* (2000). MR1424534
- [2] Everett Pitcher, *American Mathematical Society Centennial Publications Volume I: A History of the Second Fifty Years, 1939–1988*. American Mathematical Society, Providence, RI, 1988. MR1002190
- [3] National Science Foundation, *Science and Engineering Degrees: 1966–2010*. <https://nsf.gov/statistics/nsf13327/pdf/nsf13327.pdf>.



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