

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney, Associate Editor
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BLACK BUSINESS IS BLACK HISTORY!

THE HOUSTON FORWARD TIMES HIGHLIGHTS THREE HISTORY-MAKING HOUSTON BUSINESSES



Many of the contributions of Black people here in the United States of America have added so much foundational value to this country and all over the world. Whether as slaves or as a free people, Blacks have been a primary catalyst behind elevating America to a position of prominence and respect around the world.

Although many of the contributions of Blacks don't appear in traditional American textbooks and historical archives or have ever been properly chronicled by historians, the contributions of Black people should never be denied its proper place in history. More importantly, it is undeniably evident and historically relevant to acknowledge the dedicated work-ethic and rich entrepreneurial spirit that has always been a part of the genetic makeup of Black people in America. The foundation set by those who were literally stripped of everything should not be forgotten. Having been given nothing substantial to ensure an equitable and fair start, today's group of Black Americans should thank those who had to endure the struggles that afforded them the opportunity to amass a sizable buying power of close to a trillion dollars; not to mention being able to own multi-million dollar businesses and have multi-million dollar careers.

Black History Month cannot be properly celebrated in America if proper credit isn't given to the many Black Americans who endured countless socioeconomic disparities and risks associated with their desire to become successful in the areas of business and commerce. Blacks have had to rely on their learned skills, knowledge of labor, professional knowledge and intestinal fortitude to build burgeoning businesses in America.

It is with that premise that during Black History Month, the Houston Forward Times highlights several Houston-based Black businesses who have survived the Great Depression, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement and intense racism, while still standing tall today.

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In a famous speech in 1925, President Calvin Coolidge said, “The chief business of the American people is business.”

Franklin Beauty School, A-Rocket Moving & Storage and the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School are shining examples of how Black businesses have paved the way for African-American multi-million dollar entrepreneurs, CEOs and corporate executives who are successful in today’s society.

These three businesses have been serving the Greater Houston area from a combined 199 years and they show no signs of stopping any time soon. These three businesses should be celebrated for their unwavering resilience, business savvy and dedication to building businesses in the midst of tumultuous times, while overcoming the everyday challenges of maintaining and growing a successful business in today’s economy.

FRANKLIN BEAUTY SCHOOL

The beauty salon and the barber shop has always been a place where members of the Black community gather to discuss community issues, politics and of course the latest gossip. The “business of hair” has always provided a lucrative and promising career path for many African-Americans and has made many of them extremely wealthy.

By the time of her passing in 1919, Madame C.J. Walker had built one of the largest Black-owned manufacturing companies in the world, an international network of over 15,000 Madame Walker agents, beauty schools in three states, and a 32 room mansion at Irvington-on-the-Hudson, New York. Madame C.J. Walker was America’s first self-made female millionaire.

As Madame C.J. Walker was experiencing her success in New York, another female entrepreneur by the name of Madame Nobia Franklin, was beginning her journey towards success in the “business of hair.”

Franklin had seen that the “business of hair” was becoming extremely popular and had heard of

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the success Madame C.J. Walker was having. In 1915, Franklin began Franklin Beauty School, where she started teaching women how to style hair with her own manufactured hair products.

Upon the untimely death of Franklin in 1934, her daughter Abbie and son-in-law James H. Jemison (better known as J.H. Jemison) inherited her successful business. J.H. Jemison got his start in the hair business in the 1920's after working at Franklin Beauty School and obtaining his Cosmetology license in Illinois. Obtaining that license, along with effectively learning the business of hair, allowed Jemison to master the art of managing and growing the business further. The school became well-known for its extensive training administered by qualified trainers, such as Jemison himself.

Because competition in the hair business was greater in Chicago, Jemison decided to relocate Franklin Beauty School and his family to Houston, Texas, in order to take advantage of a new 1935 Texas code that required beauticians to complete one thousand hours of instruction at a licensed beauty school and pass a state written and practical test. Jemison knew that this was a grand opportunity for business growth after doing his research and uncovering that there was not only minimal competition in Houston, but that Houston had garnered a storied reputation for having the largest African-American community in the Southwestern region. After the move, Franklin Beauty School became one of the first private Cosmetology schools to be licensed in the State of Texas in 1935.

Franklin Beauty School focused on recruiting and selecting students who had demonstrated the necessary aptitude and ability to compete and succeed in the field. Many of the students were often referred by previous graduates from the school or by influential individuals who had received services from students at the school.

J.H. Jemison helped raise the mainstream value of African-American beauticians in Houston by organizing the City-Wide Beauticians Association. Before the City-Wide Beauticians Association, African-American beauticians were only licensed to style "Black" hair. Through the organization, Jemison was able to assemble beauticians to support actions to improve the earnings of beauticians and helped adopt resolutions that were forwarded to the Texas Cosmetology board. These resolutions brought forth changes that had an overwhelming impact on both the beauty industry and on behalf of all African-American hair stylists in Texas.

Jemison was a natural-born leader and was actively involved in politics; aggressively advocating against illegal discrimination laws and Jim Crow. Jemison worked with the local

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NAACP and the Negro Chamber of Commerce to help eradicate unfair Jim Crow laws and to help recruit youth into the NAACP.

In 1952, Jemison chaired the building campaign committee for the Bagby Street branch of the YMCA and through his relationship with the Caucasian community and its leaders, he helped facilitate the end of segregation at all YMCA and YWCA facilities in Houston.

Fast forward to 2013 and the practices and the principles that were foundationally laid by Madame Nobia Franklin continue on today, as the fourth generation of family is successfully running the company. Nearly 100 years later, brothers Ron Jr. and Sean Jemison are carrying the torch that their great-grandmother lit in 1915.

“It is truly an honor to know that I am carrying on a business that has such much history attached to it,” said Ron Jemison. “Many businesses die off when the founder dies, but we are intent on making sure Franklin Beauty School lives on for another 100 years.”

Franklin Beauty School expanded their services to two locations in 2012, after adding the Franklin Beauty and Barber School. Franklin Beauty School occupies over 10,000 square feet of a two level space in the MacGregor Plaza Shopping Center. They have several training classrooms, clinic areas, library/audio visual aids area, locker room, lunch room, restroom facilities and a main office. Students receive training from the latest and most updated supplies and equipment and they work with each student to assist them with finding employment upon graduation from the school.

More plans for growth are expected in the near future.

A-ROCKET MOVING & STORAGE

Family owned and operated, A-Rocket Moving & Storage has been serving the Houston area as specialists in commercial and residential moving services since 1959. Herbert and Irlene Sam founded A-Rocket Moving & Storage and began operations with one van and one employee, with a vision to grow a sustainable moving company to serve the residential moving needs of

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the Houston community.

Herbert Sam started A-Rocket after leaving the Army and upon realizing that he had no real skills to make money for his family. Armed with a plan and a truck, Sam started delivering packages and then soon switched over to moving items. He would have his son De'Andre, who was around a year old at the time he started the business, ride around in the truck with him while he worked. Herbert deeply believed that A-Rocket could be something big one day and was committed to growing it so that he could support his family and so that his children could have something to inherit.

Now in its second-generation as a family-owned and operated corporation, A-Rocket has grown from a small family business to one of Houston's most recognized businesses, providing residential and commercial moving solutions to a diverse group of clients across the greater Houston area.

A-Rocket is a multi-million dollar company located in Houston's Historic Third Ward. They own a fleet of vehicles and a 70,000 square foot facility; employ a small army of well-trained relocation and storage professionals; and offer relocation, storage, and modular assembly services to their commercial and residential clientele. They employ a diverse set of moving and storage solutions for commercial and residential clients, from industrial equipment to household goods, including planning, consultations and warehousing for any of their client's needs.

De'Andre Sam, President/CEO, is the second-generation owner of A-Rocket and has over 25 years of moving business experience with the company. He learned the business from his father and is thankful for the training he gleaned from him.

"Honestly, when my dad told me that he wanted me to carry on the legacy, I didn't think I would be able to fill his shoes," said De'Andre Sam. "After he told me that he had been preparing me for the day that I would take over, I made it a point to apply everything he taught me into making A-Rocket a continued success. He really taught me well."

De'Andre believes that running a business, especially a family business, is hard. He is grateful that his father was there to help encourage him and give him much needed wisdom during those tough times.

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“My father had gone through the things I was going through and had been there before, so I knew he could relate to what I was going through,” said De’Andre Sam. “In the early days I would get so frustrated with the business and wanted to quit. My father would say, ‘Son, if I would have felt that way what opportunity would you have had? ’I think that’s what really motivated me to suck it up and say, ‘Okay, with all my sweat there has to be some equity. I have to keep on going.’ I am so glad I didn’t quit.”

A-Rocket is not your typical, successful for-profit business. They have been providing a social service for the benefit of the Greater Houston community since inception. While it is a for-profit business, A-Rocket has helped develop the community by providing training and job opportunities to persons needing a “second” chance in life.

“At A-Rocket, a man can be trained in the moving and storage business and based on job performance be promoted to supervisor regardless of his past,” said De’Andre Sam. “His hard work and diligence is enough to start him and his family on the pathway to living a whole and complete life, and making a valuable contribution to their community.”

A-Rocket has been working to address the critical needs of many people who have been incarcerated or have made mistakes in their lives by providing jobs and helping them reintegrate into society. A-Rocket gives individuals an opportunity to become productive citizens and build stronger families by helping reduce recidivism, poverty, crime and homelessness within the Greater Houston area.

“A-Rocket Moving & Storage has helped me learn several skills such as computer technology and I earned my CDL license through various classes, which has helped me earn a living for my family,” said A-Rocket Supervisor Robert Ross. “I hope my life is an example to others. I believe that it is not what you do that defines who you are, but who you are that defines what you do.”

De’Andre says that while the economy has been challenging for everyone, they are still moving forward and are excited about continuing the legacy for another half-century and hopefully with a third generation of family members as owners.

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BEATRICE MAYES INSTITUTE CHARTER SCHOOL (BMI)

Receiving a great education for their children has been one of the primary focuses of African-American parents for centuries. Few schools and few people have achieved greater success in educating Houston children than the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School (BMI) and its namesake, Houston's own Beatrice Mayes.

Established in 1966, the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School is the oldest African-American school of its kind in Houston, Texas. Beatrice Mayes, the visionary founder and principal of the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School (BMI), has been championing a legacy of achievement since inception, leading the school to receive academic recognition and experience success that very few schools or school districts have received in the State of Texas.

Mayes became unfulfilled and disinterested in working for someone else, so she quit her job and started the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School and its early education center, Wonderland Private School (Pre-K), seeking to pursue her passion for cultivating and teaching young children.

Located in Houston's Historic Third Ward, the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School (BMI) is a state-funded school consisting of grades Kindergarten through the 8th grade and is fully accredited by the Southern Association of College and Schools. BMI is ranked in the top 1 percent among all schools in Texas.

While many other schools and school districts suffer from heavy turnover and low scores, BMI has consistently maintained quality educators, the highest school-wide academic achievement scores and exemplary status year-after-year. Their curriculum is one of the most rigorous in Texas, rivaling magnet and vanguard programs and their students perform one to two grade levels ahead.

Beatrice Mayes believes that her teaching style and approach to education is what has set BMI apart from other schools in Houston and across Texas.

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“Relationships are very central to us,” says Mayes, “The fabric is different because of our staff devotion and commitment to children mastering the well-rounded discipline as opposed to test teaching.”

Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School has attained many notable academic achievements, such as: Having over 90% of their students pass all Texas standardized tests; consistently maintaining student attendance at 97.5% for every nine week period; bringing low-skilled students’ grades up to grade-level or even above grade level (provided one full scholastic year of enrollment); scoring above average on Stanford Ten Testing; teaching computer literacy and foreign language classes to all kids from Kindergarten–8th grade.

The mission of the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School is “to develop learners who are competent, confident, productive and responsible young adults, who possess the habits, skills and attitudes needed to succeed in high school, post-secondary education and become productive members of society. The staff at BMI seeks to develop an educated citizenry for the 21st century, characterized by such traits as curiosity, lifelong learning creativity, facility with technology and the ability to communicate across disciplines, using a variety of media.

Mayes is fully involved with every teacher and is aware of what goes on in every classroom. Mayes talks to every class often and her hands-on approach sets the expectation for the school year. Mayes visits with every teacher, parent and student to ensure they understand her expectations and to let them know that there are always remedies for resolving any issue without having to immediately resort to disciplinary action.

Mayes’ two sons followed after their mother’s footsteps and are also employed at the school. Christopher Mayes serves as the Co-Superintendent and Thomas Mayes II serves as the Chief Of Staff at the school. Thomas and Christopher both found it important to continue on the legacy of their mother and attribute their success to the quality education they received from being students at Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School.

“I am a product of this wonderful school and I learned so much from my mother,” said Thomas Mayes. “My mother treated me the same as every kid at BMI. She made sure that we all received the best quality education we deserved. Her teaching style and her business savvy made my decision to come back home and work for BMI a no-brainer.”

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Beatrice Mayes strongly believes that each student should have family involvement. She vehemently believes that the parents who are engaged in their child's education become the most committed supporters and the best partners they can have to ensure each child does well and maintains solid character.

"Parents are proud when they see the difference in their child and the development they receive at our school," said Mayes. "Our results are consistent and it is my sincere hope and prayer that Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School continues to grow and make a sustainable difference in the lives of more Houston children."

Mayes says that they have a waiting list of parents who are waiting for the chance to send their child to the school and that they are planning to expand their services to begin educating students from 9th-12th grade starting in 2017.

BMI has produced many notable graduates from the school and has received national recognition and dozens of awards for outstanding achievement and excellence in education.

KEEP MAKING BLACK BUSINESS HISTORY

The saying, "Give a person their roses while they can still smell them," rings true when it comes to these three Historic Black businesses. We salute Franklin Beauty School, A-Rocket Moving & Storage and the Beatrice Mayes Institute Charter School for being modern-day examples of how to run a successful business for nearly 200 years collectively and for showing the world how to effectively pass down a business from generation to generation.

Many of our country's beloved Black institutions are being sold off, forced to close due to slumping revenues, given away for pennies on the dollar or are simply being written off by the children of these great pioneers who have paved the way for so many. These businesses need the continued support of the Greater Houston community if we hope to see them around for another 200 years.

The Houston Forward Times, who also celebrated 53 years of Black business history last

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month, salutes each and every one of these Black businesses who have experienced long-term business success over these many years. It is our hope that people will continue to support these three businesses, along with all Black businesses for many more years to come.