

BLACK ♦ STARS

AFRICAN AMERICAN MILLIONAIRES



Otha Richard Sullivan

JIM HASKINS, GENERAL EDITOR

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FOREWORD

For too long African Americans have been portrayed in many quarters as the poorest of society, who, in the past and even now, rely on government subsidies. Certainly they are not overly perceived as a real part of the monied gentry. However, many of us know that this is a well-worn stereotype, which persists in spite of steady, visible, and documented economic gains by many African Americans today. Even among the most casual observers, it is clear that African Americans are integral participants who contribute much to the economy. Many are well ensconced in the ranks of the middle class. Others have found themselves comfortably embedded among the wealthiest in the nation. It is the latter group that Otha Sullivan writes about. He gives us a glimpse into the lives of some African Americans who rose to take their place among an elite group of African Americans who became millionaires, and some of them billionaires. Through their profiles, readers are taken through a fascinating journey among people who defied all odds, without exception, to reach the economic pinnacle.

The stories of these African Americans enlighten us by revealing a little-known facet of American history. These profiles are not just about rich millionaires. They are much richer in content. They are about people who came from humble beginnings and through hard work, strategic business investments, and maybe even a little bit of luck, achieved astonishing economic success. These women and men have stories that are inspiring.

The first African American millionaire was William Alexander Leidesdorff, a successful pioneer businessman in the Bay Area. He is credited with starting the first public school in San Francisco. His story is merely the beginning.

Other nineteenth-century African American millionaires were women, such as Mary Ellen Pleasant, an astute businesswoman with sharp political acumen. Nearly a century before Rosa Parks, the mother of the modern civil rights movement, refused to relinquish her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Pleasant filed a suit against a San Francisco company for refusing her a ride on a city trolley car because of her race.

These are only two of many African American millionaires profiled by Dr. Sullivan, from the time when slavery reigned right up to the present day. They hailed from all over the nation, and they were successful in spite of their circumstances, race, or time and place in history. None of these millionaires were born with a silver spoon in their mouths. From all indications they did make their fortunes the “old-fashioned” way: they earned it.

This collection of unique life stories is as American as apple pie. It is of the pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps-and-soar genre. It is purely in the tradition of Horatio Alger; only the faces have changed. Some of these African American millionaires are well known; others are unknown. Through these profiles, Otha Sullivan debunks several myths about African American wealth. One is that the recent celebrity wealth among sports figures and entertainers represents the only path to economic success and riches open to African Americans. That is not so. Another is that the rank of millionaires from Reconstruction to the early twentieth century was an exclusive preserve of whites. That is also not so.

Dr. Sullivan’s book is an important contribution that fills in some gaps in African American history. It not only educates, it entertains and inspires. Susan Anderson, writing on black wealth, stated, “African American entrepreneurs have a unique story to share [about economic] . . . success. But the real success lies in a near universal commitment to community and civic service.” She was right and Dr. Sullivan backs her up.

This commitment to others in the black community (and beyond) is a common strand that can be found throughout the profiles. In reading about these millionaires and their pursuit of riches, Otha Sullivan makes sure that we know about their considerable philanthropic works. These African American millionaires could be a model for all the wealthy, regardless of race, color, or ethnicity.

Winston Churchill once stated, “We make a difference by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

These African American millionaires made a life.

Betty W. Nyangoni, Ph.D.
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INTRODUCTION



African Americans have used hard work, determination, and persistence to overcome incredible odds. After three hundred years of slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation finally freed U.S. slaves in 1865. By just five years later, in 1870, the year of the first census to enumerate blacks by name, many African Americans had made great strides. The U.S. Census for that year shows that blacks had already gained wealth, which was often in the form of property. My own great-great grandfather Levin Booth, a property owner in Covington County, Mississippi, was wealthy when compared to whites in the same census area. His success was repeated many times throughout the country.

Some African Americans became so successful that they became millionaires. But for many, it wasn't enough to achieve only wealth. These millionaires did their best to pass on their good fortune. African Americans have a tradition of supporting organizations and movements whose purpose is to uplift the race. These millionaires had achieved self-sufficiency and wanted to help others do the same. They often shared their wealth with those who were less fortunate.

This is called philanthropy, meaning love of humanity. Among African Americans, philanthropy has its roots in black churches and mutual aid associations. The associations were started in the late 1700s to provide assistance to people in the black community. Early African Americans were also large contributors to the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement. The Underground Railroad was a system of homes and buildings where runaway slaves could hide on their way to freedom in the North. The Abolitionist Movement was organized by people who supported the abolition of slavery.

The earliest examples of African American philanthropy are found in the Fraternal Order of Prince Hall Masons, founded in 1775; Boston's Sons of Africa Society, founded in 1788; and the African Union Society, founded in 1781. These organizations assisted black families by providing housing, financial assistance, and support for the poor.

William Alexander Leidesdorff, born in 1810 in the Virgin Islands, is considered to be the first African American millionaire in this country. His philanthropy extended to public schools and the less fortunate.

At about the same time, Mary Ellen Pleasant, often called the Mother of Civil Rights, gained wealth and influence in San Francisco. Pleasant used her business abilities to create a fortune some say was worth \$30 million in her day. She fought for the equality of African Americans and supported the fight for the abolition of slavery. Her advocacy led to African Americans gaining the right to testify at trials in California, as well as the right to ride on San Francisco streetcars.

The tradition of sharing the wealth continued into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Biddy Mason, an enterprising former slave, settled in Los Angeles, became a successful businesswoman, and made her fortune in real estate. She gave to the poor, regardless of race, and founded the First African American Methodist Church in Los Angeles.

Black millionaires and philanthropists have also made significant

gifts to institutions serving African Americans. In 1989, Oprah Winfrey gave generously to Morehouse College with a \$1 million donation. This gift was followed in 1997 with a donation of another \$1 million. Businessman and former National Basketball Association (NBA) star Michael Jordan contributed \$1 million to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to establish an institute for families at the university's school of social work. Lawyer Willie Gary pledged \$10 million in 1992 to Shaw University, an historically African American college in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Mat Dawson, a forklift driver at Ford Motor Company from Monroe, Louisiana, has donated more than \$1 million to various colleges and churches. These institutions include the United Negro College Fund, Wayne State University in Detroit, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Louisiana State University, Shreveport. Dawson's contributions have given students an opportunity to do something he did not: complete an education.

Crispus Attucks Wright, the son of a former slave in Louisiana, gave \$2 million to his alma mater, the University of Southern California (USC) Law Center, to establish scholarships in his name. A prominent attorney, he used his legal skills to fight real estate covenants, which prevented African Americans from having equal housing opportunities. He was inspired to give because of a \$50 scholarship he received when he was a law student at USC.

These African American millionaires gained wealth in a variety of ways, but they all did the same thing: they gave back. Whether donations of money or donations of time, these individuals made it their goal to help others.

PART ONE



THE EARLY YEARS