

Black Midwives Through Time • 1500 BC - 1941

1500 BC

Shiphrah and Puah were Nubian midwives who refused the Egyptian Pharaoh's order to kill all newborn Hebrew males." *The Bible* recorded their story in Exodus 1:15-21. The Bible is one of first records on the work of Black midwives. ⁷

1619

According to Sharon Robinson, in the *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* (1984), the first Black lay midwife came to America in 1619, bringing with her knowledge of health and healing based on her African background. ³

1879

Upon graduation from the New England Hospital for Women and Children Training School for Nurses, Mary Eliza Mahoney became the first Black professional nurse in the USA. ²

1900

At the turn of the 20th century, midwives delivered half of all babies born the USA, with most Black midwives receiving their training through apprenticeships. ⁶

1910

Progressive reformers used birth and death statistics to agitate for diverse ideas of health reform, which brought the practice of midwifery into public scrutiny. ¹⁸

1914

The term "nurse-midwife" is introduced by "Frederick J. Taussig, MD at the annual meeting of the National Organization for Public Health Nurses (NOPHN) to differentiate nurses educated in midwifery from apprenticeship-trained immigrant and African American midwives. ⁷

1918

Black midwives attended 87.9% of all Black births in the state of Mississippi. ¹⁴

1920

In the rural South, the terms "Granny," and "Granny-midwife" were synonymous with Black midwives. In Northeastern cities, physicians working in hospitals largely displaced midwives, as many women considered hospital births a "modern" and "advanced" form of delivery. In Southern rural areas, Black midwifery reigned because few physicians, white or Black, were willing to attend births for the fee that midwives would accept, two or three dollars per delivery. ¹⁸

1925

The Medical Association of Georgia asked the State Board of Health to supervise the practice of the 5000 lay nurse midwives in the state. ⁹

1927

Between 1927 and 1958, Deola Lange Cyrus worked with the Louisiana State Department of Health to provide antepartum and postpartum care and supervise apprentice-educated midwives. During this time, she graduated from Flint Goodrich School of Nursing, earned a certificate in public health nursing, and then entered the nurse-midwifery program In 1942 to earn a CNM credential. ⁶

1930

Midwives attended only 15% of births in the USA. ⁶

1930-1940

American physicians—primarily wealthy, native-born, white males—increasingly used standardized medical school curricula, formal credentials for practice, and professional societies with the authority for self-regulation to differentiate themselves from traditional midwives—mainly African-Americans and working-class immigrants. ¹³

1941

Tuskegee University was the first school in the nation to train Black nurse-midwives. It graduated 31 students before it closed in 1946. ⁶

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1942

Flint Goodrich Hospital in Louisiana was the second program in the nation to train Black nurse-midwives. It lasted one year and graduated two African American nurse-midwives, including Deola Lange Cyrus (see 1927).⁶

1945

Following World War II, a demand for nurse-midwifery initially arose to provide care to poor and working class women. Later, in the late 1940's, middle class women started a movement for more involvement in their childbearing experiences, which led to major advances.⁶

1950

Midwives attended 25% of all non-white births, compared to less than 5% of all births in the USA.¹⁹

1960s-1987

Fearful of retribution by the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) or their employers at home, and before the Midwives of Color Committee (MOCC) was formed Black midwives attending ACNM's annual meeting supported each other by meeting "in secret" in their hotel rooms and announced their gatherings by carefully passing a written announcement amongst themselves.⁴

1975

With the forced retirement of the few remaining Granny or lay midwives, the number of midwife-attended births reached an all-time low, demonstrating how the legacy of race, gender, class, and injustice surrounding midwifery had become deeply embedded in the dominant American cultural beliefs about birth and midwifery.¹⁹

1976

Hampton University opened the first School of Nursing master's degree program at a historically Black College or University (HBCU).⁵

1979-1991

The first Black non-profit home birth and midwifery training organization, the Traditional Childbearing Group, formed in Boston, MA. The co-founders (Shafia M. Monroe, Majeeda Amadadeen, Matina Yayah, Aishah Bailey Abdul-Musawwir) attended home births, trained direct-entry midwives and advocated for better birth outcomes and breastfeeding rates.³

1980-1988

Co-founded by Ayanna Ade and Sister Rasheeda, Childbirth Providers of African Descent (CPAD) was the first private Black midwifery professional association, holding annual meetings and education workshops.¹⁶

1984-1994

To bring home birth and midwifery services to the Black community, Dua Afe in Atlanta, GA, was founded Sarahn Henderson, Lumumba Day-Nebawi and Nasarah Smith.¹⁰

1984

A group of Black midwives founded the Midwives of Color Section of the Midwives Alliance of North America (MANA) to fill a void. They were Ayanna Ade, Afua Hassan, and Sondra Abdullah, Shafia M. Monroe, and others.¹⁶

1987-1989

To address issues related to midwives of color, ACNM formed the Ad Hoc Committee on Minority Affairs.⁴

1989-1991

MANA elected UmSalaamah Sondra Abdullah as its first Black Vice President.²¹

1990

ACNM established the Advisory Panel for Minority Affairs to inform the Board on issues that impacted midwives of color.⁴

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1991

The ACNM Advisory Panel for Minority Affairs officially became the Committee for Minority Affairs. ⁴

1991

Shafia M. Monroe, with the support of Ayanna Ade and educators, founded the first national Black midwives non-profit organization, the International Center for Traditional Childbearing (ICTC). ¹⁶

1992

To focus on issues related to midwives and women of color, the Committee for Minority Affairs became the ACNM Nurse-Midwives of Color Committee. ⁴

Late 1990s

ACNM's Nurse Midwives of Color Committee dropped "nurse" from its name to honor the Granny midwives and other traditional midwives of color who were not nurses. ⁴

2002-2017

ICTC created www.blackmidwives.org as a resource for Black midwives world-wide. ¹⁶

2002

ICTC held the first International Black Midwives and Healers Conference in Portland, OR. ¹⁶

2003

ACNM reported that less than 4% of CNMs identified as African American, compared to 11.3% for general Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree programs and 24.8% for American Association of College of Nursing member programs. ⁸

2007

ICTC became a member of the Association Midwives Organization (AMO). ¹⁹

2009

ICTC became a member of the Midwives and Mothers in Action (MAMA) campaign, a coalition of partners that included MANA, National Association of Certified Professional Midwives (NACPM), North American Registry of Midwives (NARM), Midwifery Education and Accreditation Council (MEAC), and Citizens For Midwifery (CFM). ¹⁹

2015

ICTC petitions for its right to membership with US MERA (US Midwifery Education, Regulation & Association). ²⁰

2016

ICTC joins the US MERA coalition. ¹⁵

2017

Initially formed in 2002 as the ICTC Full Circle Doula Birth Companion Training program to honor the Black midwife legacy and to increase the number of Black doulas and midwives, ICTC transferred ownership of the program to Shafia Monroe Consulting. It was renamed as SMC Full Circle Doula Birth Companion Training program. ¹⁷

2018

National Black Midwives Alliance (NBMA) was founded by Jamarah Amani and Haguerehesh Tesfa as a representative voice at the national level that clearly outlined the various needs of Black midwives. Its primary objectives are focused on 1) increasing the number of Black midwives to impact perinatal health disparities, 2) raising public awareness that Black midwives exist, 3) impacting state legislation, 4) advocating for educational pathways for Black student midwives, 5) providing scholarship opportunities for Black student midwives, and 6) offering member benefits. ¹

2020

Commonsense Childbirth School of Midwifery, owned by Jennie Joseph, LM, is the USA's first and only Black-owned, MEAC accredited, private midwifery training school. ¹²

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