

On a Stamp and on a Ship

by Don Neal

Being honored on a postage stamp truly is an honor. Having a military ship named after you is another distinguished honor. Thirteen Black Americans have had the distinction of both honors, and Booker T. Washington was the first. His stamp, issued April 7, 1940, was the first U. S. stamp that specifically commemorated a Black American. Liberty ships were a type of mass-produced cargo ships built to meet inexpensively the United States' World War II maritime transport needs. Eighteen American shipyards built 2,710 Liberty ships between 1941 and 1945 (an average of three ships every two days). On September 29, 1942, SS *Booker T. Washington*, a United States Maritime Commission (MC) Liberty ship, became the first major oceangoing ship and first of 17 Liberty ships that were named after Black Americans. At launch, Mary McLeod Bethune gave the address, and notable singer Marian Anderson christened the ship. Hugh Mulzac, the first Black American to earn a United States Merchant Marine master's license and the only Black American to have such a license, was selected to command the ship (MC hull number 648). Captain Mulzac remained in command for the next four years commanding an integrated crew composed of 17 nationalities. Five other Liberty ships were named for Black Americans who also have appeared on U. S. postage: SS *George Washington Carver*, scientist (#542, May 7, 1943); SS *Frederick Douglass*, abolitionist leader and editor (#988, May 22, 1943); SS *Paul Laurence Dunbar*, poet (#1897, October 19, 1943); SS *James Weldon Johnson*, poet, author, and diplomat (#2546, December 12, 1943); SS *Harriet Tubman*, abolitionist and leader of the Underground Railroad (#3032, June 3, 1944).



A crowd of 1,500 gathered to watch the launching of SS *George Washington Carver*. The ceremonies were organized by the United Negro Labor Committee. Lena Horne, on a break from filming *Stormy Weather*, was the sponsor, and welder Beatrice Turner, the first Black American female hired at the Richmond Shipyards, was the matron of honor. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Horne's *Stormy Weather* co-star, and actresses Dorothy Dandridge and Etta Moten ("Bess" in *Porgy and Bess*) were all scheduled to be in attendance at the event. Within seven short months, the ship was assigned by the War Shipping Administration to the American South African Line (Farrell Lines) for merchant operation in the Mediterranean. On November 23, 1943, after her brief civilian career, the WSA again transferred the ship to the War Department for U. S. Army use as a hospital ship. From November 1943 to July 1944, the ship underwent conversion to a Hague Convention hospital ship, assigned the name USAHS *Dogwood*, and served in that capacity until early 1946. She then reverted to her original name for employment as a U. S. Army Transport and became USAT *George Washington Carver* until March 1947 when she was taken out of service.



USS *George Washington Carver* (SSBN-656), a Benjamin Franklin class fleet ballistic missile submarine, was the second ship of the United States Navy to be named for George Washington Carver. The ship was sponsored by Marian Anderson and was in service from 1966 to 1993.



Knox-class frigates were the largest, last, and most numerous of the U.S. Navy's second-generation anti-submarine warfare (ASW) escorts. Originally laid down as ocean escorts (formerly called destroyer escorts), they were all re-designated as frigates on June 30, 1975, and their hull designation changed from 'DE' to 'FF' in a ship reclassification plan.

USS *Miller* (FF-1091), originally (DE-1091) was named for Messman Second Class Doris "Dorie" Miller (1919 - 1943), who was awarded the Navy Cross, the first Black American so honored, for his actions at the attack on Pearl Harbor. The ship was in service from 1973 to 1991.



USS *Doris Miller* (CVN-81) is a future Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. *Doris Miller* is scheduled to be laid down January 2026, launched October 2029, and commissioned in 2032. The ship is the first aircraft carrier named for both an enlisted sailor and a Black American. The CVN hull classification stands for aircraft carrier nuclear propulsion.

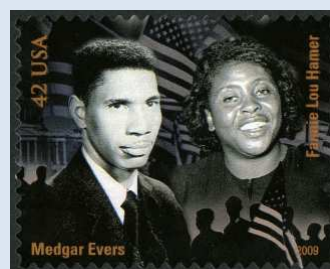


The USNS *Henson* (T-AGS 63) is a Pathfinder-class oceanographic survey ship that performs acoustic, biological, physical, and geophysical surveys, providing much of the U. S. military's information on the ocean environment. *Henson* is named after Matthew Henson (1866- 1955), who accompanied Robert Peary, most famously on an expedition intended to reach the Geographic North Pole in 1909. The ship has been in active service since February 20, 1998.



USNS *Charles Drew* (T-AKE-10) is a Lewis and Clark-class dry cargo ship of the United States Navy, named in honor of Dr. Charles R. Drew (1904-1950), who developed improved techniques for blood storage, and applied his expert knowledge in developing large-scale blood banks early in World War II, saving thousands of Allied lives. The ship was christened and launched on February 27, 2010, sponsored by Mrs. Bebe Drew Price, the eldest daughter of Dr. Drew. The principal address at the ceremony was given by Vice Admiral Regina Benjamin, the 18th Surgeon General of the United States (November 3, 2009 - July 16, 2013).

USNS *Medgar Evers* (T-AKE-13) is a Lewis and Clark-class dry cargo ship of the United States Navy. As part of the Navy's Combat Logistics Force, her mission is to deliver ammunition, provisions, dry stores, refrigerated food, spare parts, potable water, and diesel and jet fuel to U.S. Navy and allied ships while at sea. The ship is named for Civil Rights Movement activist Medgar Evers (b. 1925), a World War II veteran who was assassinated in 1963. The ship, sponsored by Myrtle Evers-Williams, has been in active service since April 24, 2012.



T-AOs are fleet oilers designed to transfer fuel to the Navy's operating carrier strike groups. The class and lead ship (T-AO 205) is named in honor of Rep. John Lewis (1940 - 2020), a civil rights activist and politician who served the state of Georgia's 5th congressional district from 1987 until his death. The ship, sponsored by Alfre Woodard, has been in service since July 27, 2022. The USNS *Sojourner Truth* (T-AO 210) is under construction and named for the abolitionist, author, and human rights activist born Isabella Baumfree (c. 1797 - 1883). The future T-AO 211 will be named USNS *Thurgood Marshall* (1908 - 1993), the first Black American justice to serve on the U. S. Supreme Court. The name selection of T-AOs follows the naval tradition of honoring people who have fought for civil and human rights.