Today in History - April 29

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Vassar College

Matthew Vassar, founder and namesake of Vassar College, was born on **April 29,** 1792, in Norfolk, England. Inspired by his niece, Lydia Booth, Vassar donated half of the fortune he had made in the brewing business, as well as 200 acres of land in Poughkeepsie, New York, to establish a women's college comparable to the best educational institutions of the day, most of which excluded women.

And so you see, to end S.C.
Our love shall never fail.
Full well we know that all we owe
To Matthew Vassar's pail.

The Autobiography and Letters of Matthew Vassar [1] Edited by Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, New York: Oxford University Press, 1916, p. 5

The Entrance, Vassar College. [Poughkeepsie, NY] c.1904. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

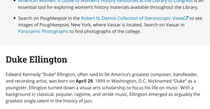
Vassar Female College was founded in 1861 and opened in September 1865 with 353 students and a faculty of thirty, twenty-two of whom were women. Courses ranged from botany to music, with the aim to raise the tuition and residence of $350. By 1873, John H. Raymond, the president of Vassar, wrote of a collegiate education for women.

The idea has ceased to be a strange one in the public mind. No subject has been more frequently or earnestly discussed for the last five years in the newspapers and magazines, and no one can doubt that the drift of the discussion has been toward a favorable verdict.

Vassar College. A College for Women, in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. A Sketch of its Foundation, Aims, and Resources, and of the Development of its Scheme of Instruction to the Present Time. [7] Prepared by the President of the College (John H. Raymond). New York: S.W. Green, Printer, 1873. p. 74.

Alumnae of distinction include Edna St. Vincent Millay (1917), the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry; environmental pioneer Ellen Swallow Richards (1870), the first woman to teach at MIT; Helen C. Putnam (1878), the first woman geneticist; cardiologist Bernice Healy (1965), the first woman to head the National Institutes of Health; and Vicki Miles-LaGrange (1974), the first African-American woman sworn in as a United States Attorney. Rear Admiral Grace Hopper (1928), a pioneer computer scientist, taught at Vassar before joining the U.S. Naval Reserves. Astronomer Maria Mitchell, one of the original faculty members at Vassar, was the first woman to be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

A coeducational institution since 1969, Vassar continues to be ranked among the top liberal arts colleges in the United States. Vassar currently enrolls approximately 2,400 students on its now 1,000-acre campus.



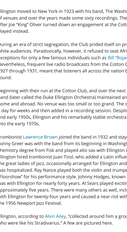
Vassar College. Thompson Photo Co., c.1912. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

Learn More

- Search on the names of colleges and universities to find other campus pictures in the Detroit Publishing Company and Panoramic Photographs collections, or search the Today in History entries on college.
- For more material on the history of women's education, see the guide and Today in History feature on Mary Church Terrell, educator, political activist, and first president of the National Association of Colored Women.
- Edna St. Vincent Millay was called the "voice of her generation." The 1912 publication of her poem "Renascence" while she was a Vassar undergraduate gained her instant recognition. A period holograph of the poem's unfinished original draft may be seen in the *Imagination* section of American Treasures of the Library of Congress exhibition.
- American Women: A Guide to Women's History Resources at the Library of Congress is an essential tool for exploring women's history materials available throughout the Library.
- Search on Poughkeepsie in the Robert N. Dennis Collection of Stereoscopic Views[7] to see images of Poughkeepsie, New York, where Vassar is located. Search on Vassar in Panoramic Photographs to find photographs of the college.

Duke Ellington

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, often said to be America's greatest composer, bandleader, and recording artist, was born on **April 29,** 1899 in Washington, D.C. Nickname "Duke" as a youngster, Ellington turned down a vocal arts scholarship to focus his life on music. With a background in classical, popular, ragtime, and stride music, Ellington emerged as arguably the greatest single talent in the history of jazz.



Portrait of Duke Ellington, Paramount Theater, New York. ; William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca Sept. 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Duke Ellington is seen here reflected in his dressing room mirror in a picture taken by William Gottlieb for an article in the September 23, 1946, issue of *Down Beat* magazine. The caption read, "Duke Ellington, with his mirror reflecting his always present piano, his conservative ties, his 20 suits, his 15 shirts, his suede shoes and his smiling self." Ellington enjoyed being the sophisticated gentleman and would tell the band, "Let's root pooty, gentlemen. It makes bad notes."

Duke Ellington taught himself James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout" by slowing down a piano roll and copying each note. When Johnson appeared in Washington, D.C. Willie Smith held a photo for Johnson and the two became friends. Later in New York, both men played Harlem rent parties.

Portrait of James Price Johnson, New York, N.Y.(1). William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. May 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Ellington moved to New York in 1923 with his band, The Washingtonians. They played a variety of venues and over the years made some sixty recordings. Their first big break came in 1927 after Joe "King" Oliver turned down an engagement at the Cotton Club and The Washingtonians played instead.

During an era of strict segregation, the Club prided itself on presenting black performers to white audiences. Paradoxically, however, it refused to seat African Americans—making exceptions for only a few famous individuals such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson or Ethel Waters. Nevertheless, frequent live radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club, where the band played from 1927 through 1931, meant that listeners all across the nation became familiar with the Ellington sound.

Beginning with their run at the Cotton Club, and over the next forty-plus years, Ellington and his band (later called the Duke Ellington Orchestra) maintained an incredibly busy schedule at home and abroad. No venue was too small or too grand. The orchestra often played two shows a day for weeks and then added in a recording session. Despite a slump during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ellington and his remarkably stable orchestra performed at this rigorous pace into the early 1970s.

Trombonist Lawrence Brown joined the band in 1932 and stayed for nineteen years. Drummer Sonny Greer was with the band from its beginning in Washington, D.C. Willie Smith held a chemistry degree from Fisk and played alto sax with Ellington in the early 1950s. In 1929, Ellington hired trombonist Juan Tizol, who added a Latin influence. Mary Lou Williams, one of the great ladies of jazz, occasionally arranged for Ellington and sat in for him at piano when he was hospitalized. Ray Nance played both the violin and trumpet, earning the nickname "Fiddlehead" for his performance style. Johnny Hodges, known for his genius on the saxophone, was with the band from 1928 to 1951 and from 1955 until his death in 1970 (with a few breaks, approximately five years. There were many others as well, including Paul Gonsalves who was with Ellington for twenty-four years and caused a near riot with his twenty-seven-chorus solo at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival.

Ellington, according to Alvin Alley, "collected around him a group of superbly gifted musicians who were like his Stradivarius." A few are pictured here.

Portrait of Sonny Greer, Aquarium, New York, N.Y.. William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. Nov 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Portrait of Willie Smith and Juan Tizol, New York, N.Y.. William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. 1946 to 1948. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Portrait of Ray Nance, Aquarium, New York, N.Y. William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. Nov. 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Portrait of Johnny Hodges and Al Sears, Aquarium, New York, N.Y.. William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. Nov. 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's closest collaborator, joined the band in 1939; they composed together constantly until Strayhorn's death in 1967. Their association is one of the most important in the history of American music. Gordon Parks said, "They were like Clark Kent and Superman, they didn't talk about the music, one would just leave it for the other one, and he would pick up as if he had been writing the whole thing himself." This practice has made it difficult to distinguish clear authorship in much of the "Ellington" work.

Portrait of Billy Strayhorn, New York, N.Y.. William P. Gottlieb, photographer, ca. Nov. 1946. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Portrait of Billy Strayhorn, New York, N.Y. between 1946 and 1948. William P. Gottlieb, photographer. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

Over the years Ellington worked musically with many people who became his friends and admirers: Florenz Zigfield, Irving Berlin, Jimmy Durante, Al Jolson, Mary Lou Williams, John Coltrane, Will Marion Cook, Lena Horne, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Max Roach, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Charles Mingus, Frank Sinatra, Maurice Chevalier, and Bing Crosby among others.

Ellington's musical versatility was astounding and not limited to a traditional jazz format. He also wrote oratorios, suites, concertos, and even opera, as well as for the Broadway stage, movies, television, nightclubs, and more. Ellington, frequently working with Billy Strayhorn, created over 1,500 pieces of music — nearly 6,000, if brief musical interludes are included. His shows, performance, and theater pieces include *Jump for Joy*, "Man with Four Sides," and "My People" (for the Century of Negro Progress Exposition in Chicago). His classical music includes "The Liberian Suite" (commissioned for the centenary of Liberia), background music for Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens,* and versions of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*.

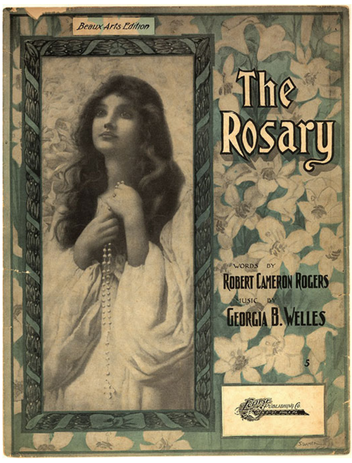
Ellington also wrote for and performed in a number of films: *Black and Tan Fantasy*, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Assault on a Queen*. In 1950, Ellington was featured in three film shorts: *Salute to Duke Ellington*; *Symphony in Swing*; and *Date with Duke*, which combined live action and animated puppets performing the Ellington/Strayhorn piece, "Perfume Suite." Ellington and Strayhorn also composed the score for the 1959 film *Anatomy of a Murder*.

In his seventies, Ellington continued to tackle new musical challenges. He accepted a commission from the American Ballet Theatre to develop *The River*, a ballet choreographed by Alvin Ailey, as well as a commission from the New York Public Broadcasting Service station, WNET, to complete a comic opera.

Ellington received sixteen honorary doctorates from U.S. universities and numerous citations. His image has been portrayed on postage stamps and medals, schools and bridges, and babies have been named in his honor. Ellington was knighted, and received the French Legion of Honor, the Ethiopian Emperor's Star, the Order of Lenin from the Soviet Union, the Spingarn Medal, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Portrait of Duke Ellington, Aquarium, New York, N.Y., between 1946 and 1948. William P. Gottlieb, photographer. William P. Gottlieb Collection. Music Division

The best known of Ellington's later works were his three Sacred Concerts, which drew on both classical European and African-American forms and styles. The first was performed in 1965 at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco; the second premiered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York; and the third in 1973 at Westminster Abbey, London. Asked why it took so long to write the last of his concerts Ellington said, "You can jive with secular music, but you can't jive with the Almighty." When Duke Ellington died in 1974 over 12,000 mourners said goodbye to "the piano player," as he called himself; "...our Shakespeare, Goethe, and Cezanne," according to Rob Gibson, the Lincoln Center's Director of Jazz.



"The Rosary," Georgia B. Welles, composer; Robert Cameron Rogers, words; Philadelphia: Eclipse, 1903. Historic American Sheet Music Duke University Libraries
At four-years-old, Edward Ellington listened to his mother play a popular piano tune, "The Rosary," and tears came to his eyes because, "It was so pretty. So pretty." He started to study piano at seven and told his next door neighbor, "One of these days I'm going to be famous."

Learn More

- The William P. Gottlieb Collection consists of over 1,600 photographs of celebrated jazz artists. It documents the jazz scene from 1938 to 1948, primarily in New York City and Washington, D.C. Search on names such as *Duke Ellington*, *Billy Strayhorn*, *Louis Armstrong*, *Charlie Parker*, *Billie Holiday*, *Dizzy Gillespie*, *Lena Horne*, *Stan Kenton*, *Ella Fitzgerald*, or *Mel Tormé* to see these artists at work and play.
- Search on terms such as *rag* and *jazz* in the following collections to see examples of such tunes as they were distributed in sheet music form when Ellington was young. Remember that these primary historical documents reflect the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of different times and may contain materials offensive to some readers.
  - Historic American Sheet Music Duke University Libraries
  - African American Sheet Music Brown University Libraries
- African-American regiments in World War I usually were accompanied by bands. The most famous was the band of the 369th Infantry ("Harlem Hellfighters"), led by James Reese Europe. Such bands introduced many Europeans and American servicemen to jazz and ragtime rhythm and African-American performance styles. Vaudeville star Noble Sissle, who belonged to Europe's band, prepared *The Memoirs of "Jim" Europe*. It includes information about the racial climate in the U.S. and France and is presented in the Echoes of the Great War: American Experiences of World War I online exhibition. In November 1918 *The Cleveland Advocate* carried a related article, "Colored Yank Soldiers Jazz Their Way Through France," part of the collection The African-American Experience in Ohio: Selections from the Ohio Historical Society.
- Read more about James Reese Europe through newspaper coverage found in Chronicling America, the database of historic American newspapers. Start with James Reese Europe: Topics in Chronicling America
- Search on *Noble Sissle* and *James Reese Europe* in the African-American Band Music & Recordings, 1883 to 1923 collection for their biographies. Search the collection for links to numerous other recording artists' biographies and sound recordings.
- Leonard Bernstein discussed the overlap of jazz and symphonic music in his New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert series. Search on the term *jazz* in the Leonard Bernstein collection to find a typescript of that March 1964 program as well as other related items.
- The Writers' Project of The Works Progress Administration (WPA), provided jobs for unemployed writers during the Depression. Among these writers were Zora Neale Hurston, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, John Cheever, Richard Wright, and poet May Swenson. Interviews conducted by these and other writers comprise the collection American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940. Search the collection on the term *jazz* and read, for example, about Jazz Music (Chicago).

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