

*Today in Black History -February 16 *

1801 - The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church officially separates from its parent, the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Zion church will be incorporated as the African Episcopal Church of the City of New York. James Varick will be its first pastor and will later become the first black African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) bishop. It will hold its first national conference in 1821. The name Zion will not be added to the church's name until 1848.

1874 - Frederick Douglass is elected President of Freedman's Bank and Trust Company.

1923 - Bessie Smith makes her first recording for Columbia Records. The record, "Down Hearted Blues," written by Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin, will sell an incredible 800,000 copies and be Columbia's first popular hit.

1944 - The U.S. Navy starts its first officer training class of African Americans at Camp Robert Smalls, Great Lakes, and Illinois. Although all passed the course, in March 1944, 13 of the group made history when they became the U.S. Navy's first African-American officers on active duty. 12 were commissioned as ensigns; the thirteenth was made a warrant officer. They became known as the "Golden Thirteen." They were often denied the privileges and respect routinely accorded white naval officers and were given menial assignments. Only one of the Golden Thirteen made a career of the Navy. The others made their marks in civilian life after World War II.

1951 - James Ingram is born in Akron, Ohio. He will be raised there on Kelly Avenue. He will later become a rhythm and blues singer and will earn at least three Grammy Awards and seventeen Grammy nominations.

1951 - The New York City Council passes a bill prohibiting racial discrimination in city-assisted housing developments.

1957 - LeVar Burton is born in Landstuhl, Germany. He will become an actor, winning a landmark role in the award-winning mini-series, "Roots," as the enslaved African youth Kunta Kinte, while attending USC. He will go on to become a producer, director and writer for numerous television series and films.

1970 - Joe Frazier knocks out Jimmy Ellis in the second round to become the undisputed world heavyweight boxing champion.

1972 - Wilt Chamberlain scores his 30,000th point in his 940th game, a basketball game between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Phoenix Suns. He is the first player in the NBA to score 30,000 points.

1992 - The Los Angeles Lakers retire Magic Johnson's uniform, # 32.

1999 - Mary Elizabeth Roche, best known as Betty Roche, joins the ancestors at the age of 81 in Pleasantville, New Jersey. She was a singer who performed with Duke Ellington in the 1940s and 1950s. She sang with the Savoy Sultans from 1941 to 1943, when she joined Ellington's group. She scored high marks from critics for the suite "Black, Brown and Beige," at Ellington's first Carnegie Hall concert. She also performed Ellington's signature song "Take the A Train" in the 1943 film. "Reveille With Beverly."