

\* Today in Black History - February 20 \*

1864 - Confederate troops defeat three African American and six white regiments at the Battle of Olustee, about fifty miles from Jacksonville, Florida. The African-American units are the 8th U.S. Colored Troops, the 35th U.S. Colored Infantry, and the famous 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry. It is the 54th Massachusetts' fighting that allowed General Truman Seymour's Union forces to retreat. One white veteran of the battle states: "The colored troops went in grandly, and they fought like devils." A regrettable episode in the aftermath of the battle is the apparent mistreatment of Union African American soldiers by the Confederates.

1895 - Frederick Douglass, famous African American abolitionist and diplomat, joins the ancestors in Washington, DC at the age of 78. His home in Washington will be later turned into a national monument under the auspices of the National Park Service.

1911 - Frances Ellen Watkins Harper joins the ancestors in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at the age of 85. She had been a writer and antislavery, women's rights, and temperance activist.

1925 - Alex La Guma is born in Cape Town, South Africa. He will become a novelist whose writings reflect the lives of the ghetto dwellers in the 'Coloured' sections of Capetown, portrayed best in his novel, "A Walk in the Night." The ghettos and shanties of the Cape were his milieu, and he will never depict the lives of the impoverished with either rancor or self-pity. The powerful strokes of his pen will paint a picture of the starkness and reality of their lives. He allowed the tin and hessian fabrics of the rat-infested, leaking hovels to spell it out. He will become involved with the South African Coloured People's Organisation, playing a very active part in its affairs. He will be exiled in 1966 and move with his family to London. At the time he joins the ancestors in 1985, he was the Chief Representative of the African National Congress in Cuba.

1927 - Sidney Poitier is born prematurely in Miami, Florida, weighing only three pounds. His parents are on a regular trip to the U.S. to sell tomatoes and other produce. He will be raised in the Bahamas and return to the United States as a teenager to live with his older brother in Miami. He will move to New York City in 1945 to study acting. He will become one of the modern movies' leading men, making his screen debut in 1950 and earning praise in such films as "Cry the Beloved Country," "Blackboard Jungle," "Porgy and Bess," "A Raisin in the Sun," "To Sir With Love," "In the Heat of the Night," and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." His 1965 role in "Lilies of the Field" will earn him an Oscar, the first for an African American in a leading role.

1929 - Writer Wallace Thurman's play "Harlem" opens in New York City. It is the first successful play by an African American playwright.

1936 - John Hope, president of Atlanta University, joins the ancestors at the age of sixty seven.

1937 - Nancy Wilson is born in Chillicothe, Ohio. She will become a well-known jazz and pop singer, singing with Cannonball Adderly, George Shearing, Art Farmer and Chick Corea, among others. She will make more than 50 albums, including "With My Lover Beside Me," featuring the lyrics of Johnny Mercer and the music of Barry Manilow.

1951 - Emmett L. Ashford, one of baseball's most popular figures, becomes the first African American umpire in organized baseball. Ashford is certified to be a substitute in the Southwestern International League. He will later (1966) become the first African American major league umpire, working in the American League.

1963 - Baseball great, Willie "The Say Hey Kid" Mays, signs with the San Francisco Giants as baseball's highest paid player (at that time). He will earn \$100,000 a year.

1963 - Charles Barkley is born in Leeds, Alabama. He will forego his senior year at Auburn University to enter the NBA as a forward for the Philadelphia 76ers. Barkley will post averages of 20 or more points and at least 10 rebounds per game for 11 seasons. His achievements during that span will be remarkable. He will be an All-NBA First Team selection in 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1993, an All-NBA Second Team pick in 1986, 1987, 1992, 1994 and 1995 and an All-NBA Third Team choice in 1996. He will be selected to 10 consecutive All-Star Games, and receive more All Star votes than any other player in 1994, and will be MVP in the 1991 All-Star classic.

1968 - State troopers use tear gas to stop civil rights demonstrations at Alcorn A&M College in Mississippi.

1991 - African Americans win Grammys including Mariah Carey for Best New Artist and female pop vocal, Anita Baker for female R&B vocal, Luther Vandross for male R&B vocal, Living Colour for best hard rock performance, M.C. Hammer for best rap solo and best R&B song for "U Can't Touch This," and Chaka Khan and Ray Charles for best R&B vocal by a duo or group. Quincy Jones becomes the all-time non-classical Grammy winner when he wins six awards at these 33rd annual Grammy Awards, including album of the year, "Back on the Block."

1997 - T. Uriah Butler joins the ancestors in Fyzabad, Trinidad at the age of 100. Born in Grenada, he had been a major labor organizer and politician in Trinidad. In 1975, he was awarded Trinidad's highest honor, The Trinity Cross.