



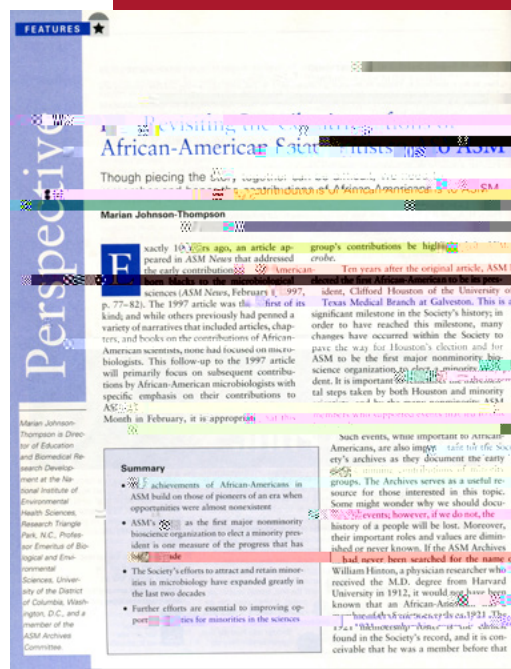
AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MICROBIOLOGY

# Revisiting the Contributions of African-American Scientists to ASM

Though piecing the story together can be difficult, we need to remember and honor the contributions of African-Americans to ASM.

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*This article (scanned copy shown to the right) originally appeared in Microbe, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 82-87, in 2007. The article is currently housed in the Center for History of Microbiology/ASM Archives (CHOMA) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Please note that this archived document uses language and terminology that is not in line with DEI best practices today.*



Exactly 10 years ago, an article appeared in ASM News that addressed the early contributions of American-born blacks to the microbiological sciences (ASM News, February 1997, p. 77-82). The 1997 article was the first of its kind; and while others previously had penned a variety of narratives that included articles, chapters and books on the contributions of African-American scientists, none had focused on microbiologists. This follow-up to the 1997 article will primarily focus on subsequent contributions by African-American microbiologists, with specific emphasis on their contributions to ASM. As the Society recognizes Black History Month in February, it is appropriate that this group's contributions be highlighted in *Microbe*.

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Ten years after the original article, ASM has elected the first African-American to be its president, Clifford Houston of the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. This is a significant milestone in the Society's history; in order to have reached this milestone, many changes have occurred within the Society to pave the way for Houston's election and for ASM to be the first major nonminority bioscience organization to elect a minority president. It is important to remember the incremental steps taken by both Houston and minority scientists, and by the many nonminority ASM members who supported events that led to this historical event.

Such events, while important to African-Americans, are also important for the Society's archives, as they document the early and continuing contributions of minority groups. The Archives serves as a useful resource for those interested in this topic. Some might wonder why we should document such events; however, if we do not, the history of a people will be lost. Moreover, their important roles and values are diminished or never known. If the ASM Archives had never been searched for the name of William Hinton, a physician researcher who received an M.D. degree from Harvard University in 1912, it would not have been known that an African-American was a member of the Society as early as 1921. The 1921 membership roster is the

## Summary

- The achievements of African-Americans in ASM build on those of pioneers of an era when opportunities were almost nonexistent
- ASM's status as the first major nonminority bioscience organization to elect a minority president is one measure of the progress that has been made
- The Society's efforts to attract and retain minorities in microbiology have expanded greatly in the last two decades
- Further efforts are essential to improving opportunities for minorities in the sciences

earliest found in the Society's record, and it is conceivable that he was a member before that time. The fact that William Hinton's parents were former

## Increasing the Participation of Black Microbiologists in ASM

When one looks at the black microbiologists who provided the leadership from within to increase the participation of black microbiologists in Society activities, one has to highlight the role of James Jay. Jay, Professor Emeritus of Biological Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich., is best known for his classic popular textbook, *Modern Food Microbiology*, now in its 7th edition (Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 2005). Released first in 1970 in English, the text has been published in Spanish, Hindi, Malaysian and Chinese. Long revered by many, Jay is the singular individual who has been a repository of historical accomplishments and activities by black microbiologists, and he has played a significant role in mentoring many. Because of this, he is respectfully and honorably referred to as the "Father of Black Microbiologists," and this article is dedicated to him.

The actual involvement of blacks in Society activities occurred at a very slow pace up to the mid-1990s. There were several nonminority ASM members who played significant roles in reversing this trend. One such individual who ranks high above others is Harlyn O. Halvorson (ASM President, 1974, and former chair of the Public and Scientific Affairs Board [PSAB], 1979—1987). As PSAB chair, Halvorson appointed ASM's first minority committee and was

a tireless supporter of advancing the involvement of minorities in Society activities. Halvorson demonstrated what can be accomplished when those in leadership positions call attention to an issue.



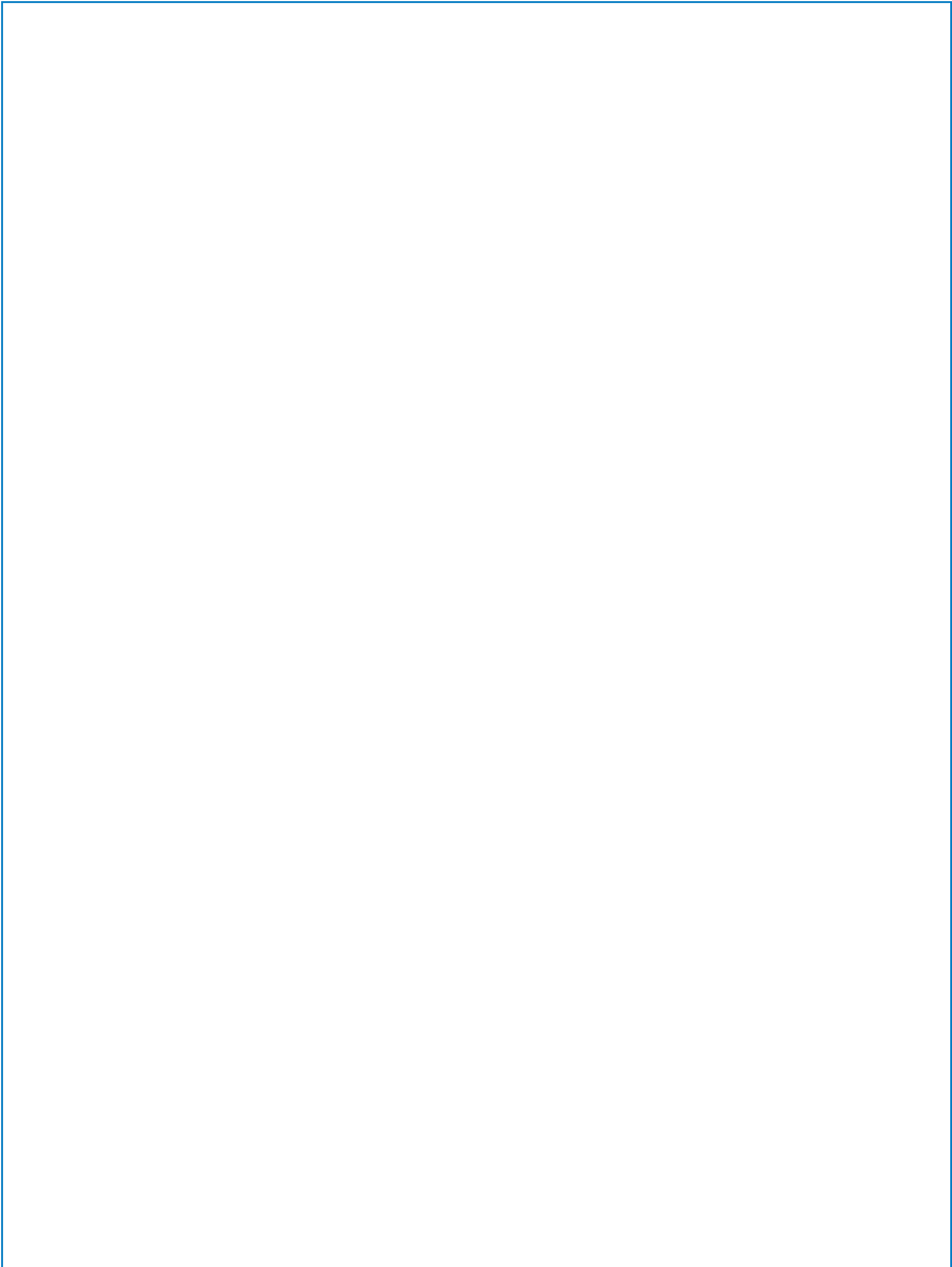
*James Jay*



*Harlyn O. Halvorson*

## Mobilizing Black Microbiologists

Jay was a mentor and role model for many black microbiologists who attended ASM meetings in the 1970s and onward. It was at the 1978 General Meeting that I met Jay. He was busy organizing a group to meet on the outside perimeter of the convention center. At that time, there was no ASM-sponsored reception for minority microbiologists, and black meeting attendees would usually meet in a hotel room or at a restaurant over dinner. In 1981, Jay did a mailing to organize a formal gathering for the 1982 Atlanta meeting. The gathering was held at the Atlanta America, and invitees were asked to donate \$7.00 to cover refreshments. Atlanta University cordially paid for the location; and Rena Jones of Spelman College, who incidentally received her Ph.D. under Jay, organized the event. At the 1983 meeting in New Orleans, the gathering was held at the New Orleans Marriott Hotel, the donation request was \$10.00, and the group was growing. In 1984 or 1985, ASM began to sponsor the reception, and today the ASM Minority Mixer is well attended, not only by minorities, but also by a diverse group of ASM members, including the Society's officers.





## Expansion of ASM's Minority Committees

Earlier efforts of CSMM led to the establishment of a Minority Task Force, cochaired by Henry Williams and Gail Cassell of the University of Alabama, Birmingham (currently at Eli Lilly and a former ASM President). This task force's recommendations led to additional minority committees and increased efforts to include minority members in ASM activities.

The Committee on Minority Education of the Education Board was created in 1993, and its first chair was George Hill (Meharry Medical College). In 1997, the Underrepresented Members Committee (UMC) of the Membership Board was created, and its first chair was George Counts of the Fred

Hutchinson Cancer Center, now retired. The UMC has established several initiatives, including the Faces of ASM Series, an online mentoring program and a mechanism for ensuring that minority members interested in serving on committees and editorial boards are able to do so. The American Academy of Microbiology (AAM) established a Diversity Committee in 1999, chaired by Eugene Cota Robles of the University of California, Santa Cruz, now retired. In 2003, Marian Johnson-Thompson was appointed chair of the Diversity Committee and became the first African-American to hold this position. Each of these committees has missions to increase minority participation in their respective domains.



## Hinton Award

Another outcome of the Minority Task Force was the establishment of the William A. Hinton Research Training Award in 1997. This award honors outstanding contributions fostering the research training of underrepresented minorities in microbiology and is directed by the American Academy of Microbiology, as are all of the Society's awards programs. The first Hinton Award Committee was chaired by James Jay, and the first award was made in 1998 to Luther Williams of the National Science Foundation (currently at Tuskegee University). Table 1 lists subsequent laureates.

It is instructive to look at similar awards of other professional societies. The American Society of Cell Biology Minorities Affairs Committee was launched in 1980, and in 1984 its members established the E. E. Just Award. The Minorities in Cancer Researcher, only recently established the Jane Wright (1919- ) Award in 2006. The National Organization of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE), organized in 1972, made its first Percy Julian (1899-1975) Award in 1974. The American Chemical Society (ACS), the world's largest scientific organization, elected Henry A. Hill and its first African-American President in 1977. Following his death 1979, the Henry Hill Award was established, and it is presented by the ACS Division of Professional Relations.

## American Academy of Microbiology

The American Academy of Microbiology (AAM) has more than 2,000 elected members. Welton Taylor, elected in 1974, is believed to be the first African-American Fellow, there are some 2 dozen African-American members (Table 2). A review of

election dates show that most were elected in the 1990s. African-American Fellows have participated in AAM colloquia and on the AAM's board of governors, and 2 members have served as chairs of AAM committees. The dates of certification by the American Board of Medical Microbiology (ABMM) are strictly confidential; however, Welton Taylor is believed to be the first African-American to be certified as a Diplomate of the ABMM.

## Other Milestones

In 1999, the Society celebrated its centennial year, and one African-American—Ed Hanna of the National Institutes of Health—served on the Centennial Planning Committee. On the covers of the preliminary and final program booklets, only six microbiologists were featured, and Hinton was among the 6. Additionally, a poster was displayed that featured contributions by microbiologists and Hinton was included.

ASM began to form student chapters in 1990. While Johnson-Thompson served on the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Membership, the Thomas B. Smith Student Chapter was established at Howard University, in 1991 the first such chapter at a HBCU.

ASM has significantly increased its efforts to engage underrepresented members in all facets of Society activities, and to increase the participation of this group in the microbiological sciences. The early efforts of black microbiologists and subsequent efforts have paved the way for emerging black microbiologists and other underrepresented groups to be able to enjoy the full range of Society opportunities. Now that we have reached this point, we must continue the momentum and never forget the efforts of those who worked to ensure that a member of an underrepresented minority could become president of ASM.



## SUGGESTED READING

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