

# Preface

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Now and then I receive emails and letters from students requesting assistance. Most often, the request concerns some aspect of African American society. The questioners have ranged in age from those in their earliest teenage years to typical college students to mature seniors enrolled in community college during their retirement years. Their inquiries have covered a wide spectrum of topics. They seek information about personalities, issues, and events covering the gamut from straightforward questions of who, when, or what to complex interrogatories seeking some definitive why. Recent examples fresh in my mind are: Who was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from an American institution of higher education? When was the Black Congressional Caucus formed? What was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party? Why do African Americans have higher unemployment rates than most other racial and ethnic groups?

When the publisher of *The Encyclopedia of African American Society* invited me to serve as general editor of this new work, one of my first thoughts was of these kinds of requests and the people who make them. Those (usually young) people and their millions of peers were the deciding factor in my decision to undertake the project. Our objective was to gather in two volumes a comprehensive assembly of concise essays that would provide many of the answers to just the kinds of questions that countless students—and often general readers—frequently seek. The objective was not to offer a complete discourse on these issues

(the student is advised against summarizing any of these entries to turn in as a term paper) but to provide the reader with a reliable and initial reference as a point of entry—a starting point for learning basic facts and ideas about African American society and for obtaining guidance about where to go for more information. A further objective was to insist on entries written in clear, unassuming prose accessible to secondary school students but sophisticated enough to be useful to those at the more advanced stages of their education.

The pages that follow meet those objectives. Within them, the reader can find out that in 1876, Alexander Bouchet of New Haven, Connecticut, received a Ph.D. in physics from Yale University, becoming the first African American to be awarded a doctoral degree from an American institution of higher learning; that the Black Caucus was formed in 1971; that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was a political party that was formed to fight for black political rights and that in 1964 challenged the legitimacy of the all-white Democratic state primary; and, although even professional economists disagree as to a definitive explanation of why African Americans have higher unemployment rates, the reader can find an informative discussion of the issue in the following pages. We hope you enjoy the journey.

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