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in the face of adversity. In 1921, John W. Cromwell Jr. became the first Black CPA, an accomplishment that opened doors for generations of aspiring Black CPAs.

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By Anita Dennis.

Throughout 2021, the profession celebrated a landmark achievement that occurred in the face of adversity. In 1921, John W. Cromwell Jr. became the first Black CPA, an

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The Black CPA Centennial highlighted the inspiring stories of Black CPAs who broke through barriers and inspired others to do the same. Some of the pioneers who were featured include:

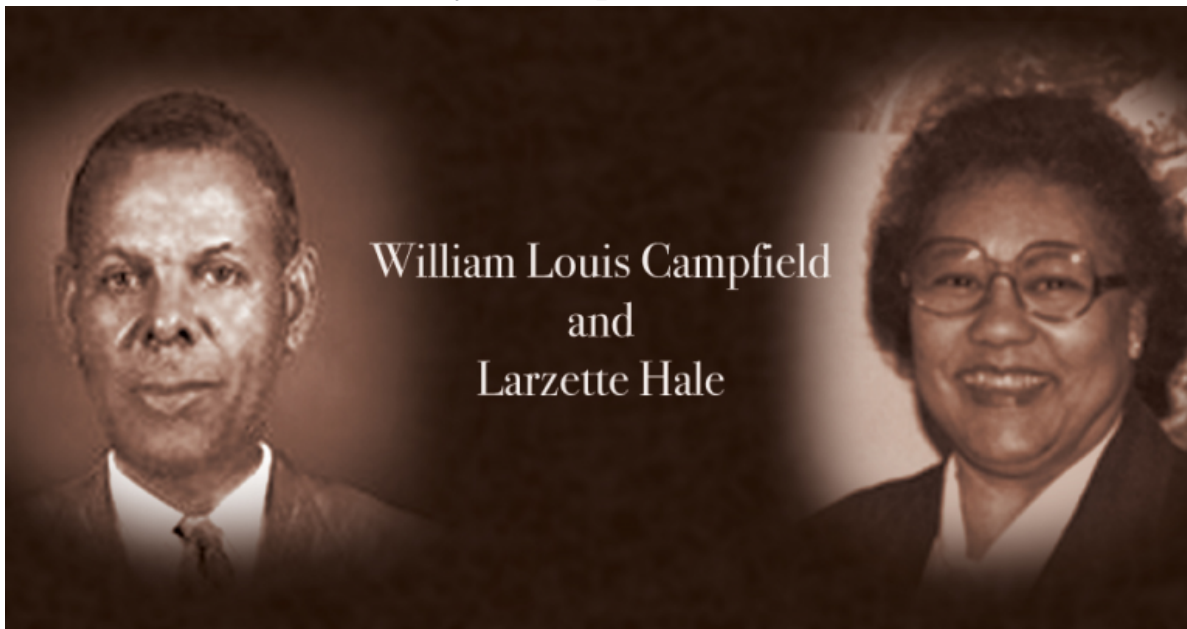



Cromwell, whose family put an emphasis on education, attended a college preparatory program at Howard. He studied mathematics and astronomy at Dartmouth, earning a bachelor's and master's degree, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, and winning the Thayer Prize in mathematics there. Although he also taught himself accounting, he had to wait 15 years to become a CPA. The delay occurred because he was unable to obtain the experience needed for licensure since CPA firms refused to hire him and other Black accountants during that time because they insisted that white clients wouldn't work with a Black person. In 1921, he took the Uniform CPA Examination in New Hampshire, which did not have an experience requirement. During his career, he worked with clients in the Washington, D.C., area, taught mathematics, and spent three years as the comptroller of Howard University.

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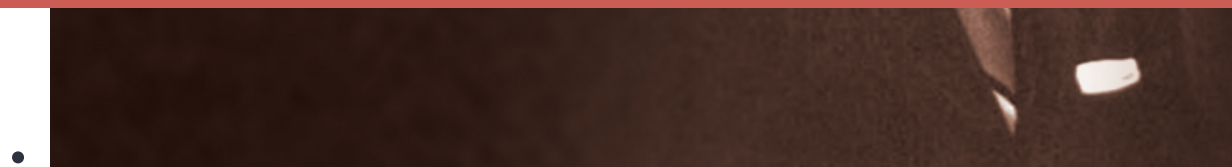
-  **Mary T. Washington Wylie** became the nation's first Black woman CPA and the 13th Black person to become a CPA in 1943, a full 22 years after Cromwell earned his credential. After opening a practice in her basement in Chicago, she worked tirelessly to find and employ aspiring Black CPAs so that they would have the experience they needed to join the profession. Her firm's clients were generally small Black-owned businesses and not-for-profits, as well as large Black-owned companies. The firm would ultimately grow to become one of the largest Black-owned firms in the country at one point.



-  **Having** Black professors teaching accounting classes can influence whether Black students choose to study accounting. Two pioneers opened the door to academia for generations who came after them: **William Louis Campfield**, who became the first Black CPA Ph.D. in 1951, and **Larzette Hale**, who became the first woman Black CPA Ph.D. in 1955. Among other achievements, Campfield would ultimately be the first Black accountant to be inducted (posthumously) into the American Accounting Association's Hall of Fame, while Hale would head Utah State University's school of accountancy and was the first Black person appointed a

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- Fifty years after Black people first entered the profession, **Elmer J. Whiting Jr.** broke another barrier in 1971 by becoming the first Black partner of what were known at the time as the Big 8 firms. Armed with an MBA from Case Western University and a law degree from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, he had struggled to get the experience he needed after college. Finally, he successfully petitioned to have bookkeeping work counted as valid experience for CPA licensure and became the first Black CPA in Ohio in 1950. He opened his own successful firm in Cleveland and became a Big 8 partner when his practice was purchased by Ernst & Ernst.

Those are just a few of the leaders and role models recognized during the Black CPA Centennial. In addition, many others — such as organizations whose everyday missions support and promote the advancement of Black CPAs, as well as numerous state CPA societies — have robust initiatives to improve the profession's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Celebrating the progress

The yearlong anniversary campaign culminated with a special virtual celebration event in November to honor the past, celebrate the achievements, and build on the future of the Black CPA community. It also highlighted the outstanding Black CPAs chosen for the inaugural 40 Under 40 Black CPA Award.

The event featured inspiring stories of some of the first Black CPAs and highlighted unique programs that support aspiring Black CPAs.

Proceeds from the virtual celebration and donations from individuals and organizations are being directed to the Black CPA Centennial Fund, which was

established earlier this year to support national scholarships and other programs to

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However, despite the tenacious work of these individuals and organizations, the percentage of Black CPAs in the profession is still far too low. Significant progress is needed.

In addition to honoring trailblazing Black CPAs, the [articles in this series](#) have also focused on advice for firms and other employers that want to recruit, retain, and advance more Black CPAs. Some of the recommendations are to:

- Introduce Black students to the opportunities available in the profession. Given the small percentage of Black CPAs, it is less likely that Black students will grow up knowing CPAs and learning about what they do. CPAs can begin by doing presentations that introduce the profession to elementary and high schools with minority populations.
- Improve the number of Black CPAs teaching accounting. Students are more likely to be drawn to classrooms and careers if related courses are taught by people who look like them.
- Expand the recruiting horizon. Consider stepping up recruiting efforts at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.
- Focus on advancing more role models. Black students and young professionals may choose other careers if they cannot envision themselves being successful in the profession. They may also feel more included at a firm that clearly welcomes and supports Black professionals.
- Understand the financial and other hurdles that Black students may experience. For example, some may need to juggle one or more jobs to finance school and the cost of preparing for the Uniform CPA Examination. In hiring and attempting to retain Black professionals, employers should be aware of the impact that their financial situation may have on their academic background and ability to become certified.

- Make sure that Black professionals have the same opportunities to grow. Be

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The [Black CPA Centennial](#) was a yearlong effort to honor, celebrate, and build upon the progress Black CPAs have made in shaping the accounting profession. The celebration was a collaborative effort of the AICPA, Diverse Organization of Firms, Illinois CPA Society, National Association of Black Accountants, and National Society of Black CPAs.

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Accounting

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