

EXCLUSIVES

Black Spartans (1907-1948)

Lucy Turner (Johnson) in 1907, the first Black graduate of SJSU when it was known as the San José State Normal School.

We invite you to explore San José State University's (SJSU) new exhibit "[Black Spartans \(1907-1948\)](#)," a first look at an ongoing research project in [SJSU Special Collections & Archives](#) to discover documentation of Black experiences in the university's history. Learn the stories of the earliest Black SJSU students through 19 individual portraits that grace the covers of digital scrapbooks containing clippings and photographs that illuminate the students' lives.

Black students have been a central part of SJSU's history—as scholars, athletes, artists, and activists—yet there has not been enough intentional effort to document these experiences and accomplishments and make them available to researchers. "Black Spartans" serves to highlight some of these obscured stories and to identify the people, organizations, and events about which we hope to seek more information and records.

Much of the information we have comes from the *Spartan Daily* student newspaper and the La Torre yearbooks. This means that, with too few exceptions, Black Spartans' stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. Seeking resources that reflect the perspectives of Black students, faculty, and staff is an ongoing effort.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio.

Locally, "the deed to virtually every home in San José" included restrictions, known as "restrictive covenants," against Black and Asian residents (*Spartan Daily*, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events. We chose to center the students' stories instead of images depicting these realities, but this context is necessary to begin to understand what everyday life may have been like.

This project responds to frequent questions posed by visitors to the Reading Room seeking documentation of Black experiences on campus—documentation that is often difficult to find due to traditional archival arrangement practices. This exhibit is one way of making the information easier to find and invites community partners, especially descendants of the students featured, to contribute to the ongoing research.

Though the "Black Spartans" project began in response to researcher questions, it really took flight when an ad hoc group of California State University archivists began meeting regularly to discuss strategies for surfacing Black histories on our campuses. The generous sharing of ideas, questions, challenges, and successes formed the foundation of what became this exhibit.

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" is an invitation to the community to join us in this work, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students' lives. We invite community members within and beyond SJSU to participate in surfacing these stories, sharing information, and ensuring these histories are preserved and accessible. We also hope this project can serve as a model for uncovering underdocumented stories of other communities on campus. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

The physical exhibit closes on April 1, 2022, but you can still see it [virtually](#).

Carli V. Lowe and Kate Steffens
SJSU Special Collections & Archives
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library
special.collections@sjsu.edu