

# SUCCESS

IS

# MANDATORY



*Struggle, Perseverance, and Triumph at USMMA*



*Black History Month 2024*

**THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM**  
**“HIGHLIGHTS IN LEADERSHIP AND DIVERSITY” SERIES**

1. *KP Women: Breaking the Gender Barrier* (2018)
2. *With Courage and Good Cheer: The Life of Peter Chue* (2021)
3. *A Long Way to Go: LGBTQ+ Seafarers, 1941-Present* (2022)
4. *“I Am a Jew”: USMMA’s Jewish Community, 1942 to Present* (2023)
5. *SUCCESS Is Mandatory: Struggle, Perseverance, and Triumph at USMMA* (2024)

The above booklets are available online at <https://www.usmma.edu/about/museum/highlights-leadership-and-diversity-series>

*Cover: Plebe Candidate Jonathan Perkins ('09), Acceptance Day 2005.*

## INTRODUCTION BY VADM NUNAN



One of our proudest boasts is that Kings Point has never barred students based on race. As evidence, we point to Joseph Banks Williams, an African American whose 1944 graduation came just one year after the Academy's official dedication.

As part of our 2024 celebration of Black History Month, this booklet honors the memory and continuing legacy of the African American midshipmen who have followed in Williams's footsteps. These pages record some of the experiences of our

African American graduates, focusing on their triumphs but always keeping in mind their struggles to overcome prejudice and intolerance. It is only when their successes are our successes and their stories inspire us that we can say we have fully embraced diversity.

A special thanks goes out to the Kings Point Black Alumni Society, especially Rodney Gregory ('74), and Erin Gantt ('83), who generously shared their time and resources with the USMMA Black History Month Committee and the Museum staff. This exhibit could not have been completed without their support. Finally, we value the story of every African American who has attended USMMA. We only wish we could include them all.

*Acta Non Verba,*

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joanna M. Nunan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

VADM Joanna M. Nunan, USMS  
Superintendent, USMMA

## JOE WILLIAMS AND HIS QUEST FOR SUCCESS

Joseph B. Williams was the first Black man to graduate from USMMA and was very successful in his professional life. Williams was born in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1921, one of four siblings. As a child, he had expressed a desire to attend the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA). He graduated from Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Hampton, Virginia, in 1942 with a bachelor's degree. To help pay for his education, Williams worked as a busboy and



*Joseph B. Williams's photo used for his Continuous Discharge Book in 1940.*

waiter on board the SS *Kent* of the Merchants and Mariners line in the summer of 1940. As a crew member, the government issued him a mariner's "Continuous Discharge Book," a predecessor to the modern Z-card, number 231180.

Williams maintained his desire to attend USNA, and newspaper accounts indicate that in 1942 Williams received an appointment to USNA from African American Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell of Illinois. However, according to John Beecher's book *All the Brave Sailors*, USNA rejected Williams's application on the "specious grounds that his required mathematics had

been taken three or more years previously," and he wasn't even allowed to take the entrance examination. While we can only conjecture, USNA had a reputation that included "railroading" Black midshipmen out of the institution. At that point in time, USNA had not graduated a single African American. Its first Black graduate was Wesley A. Brown (class of 1949), who endured an organized campaign of discrimination and harassment, including racial slurs and groundless demerits that nearly caused him to be expelled. He suffered from extreme isolation. His peers would not sit near him, and he had to room alone.

After graduation from Hampton in 1942, Williams worked briefly as a school teacher for the National Youth Association in Virginia. During this time, he applied to USMMA, noting on his application that “my abilities are best suited for deck work.” USMMA had no record of segregation, and offered a means of becoming a naval officer. It accepted his application without delay, but by the end of 1942, becoming anxious about when to report, he wrote two letters requesting clarification in December. As it turned out, while the Academy wanted Williams, the Navy did not. USMMA’s Superintendent, Richard R. McNulty, known as the “father” of the Academy, had to send a stern telegram to the Navy on January 12, writing:

APPLICATION OF JB WILLIAMS COLORED, IS IN ORDER. SAME HAS ATTACHED THERETO PHOTOGRAPH WHICH SHOWS THAT HE IS COLORED. THEREFORE NO FALSIFICATION, AND I ACCEPTED FOR MIDSHIPMAN APPOINTMENT AND PHYSICALLY QUALIFIED, MUST BE ASSIGNED TO THE ACADEMY. APPLICATI[ON] SHOWS COLLEGE GRADUATE AND WORKED ONE SUMMER FOR MERCHANT AND MINERS STEAMSHIP COMPANY

Williams reported to Kings Point on January 13, 1943. He did well at the Academy academically, although one officer noted a “tinge of a superiority complex” in him. The Academy’s administration and faculty did not discriminate against Williams, but there certainly were racist incidents involving fellow cadets. Mostly this consisted of “staring, whispering, and threatening,” with one cadet officer in particular harassing Williams and declaring he wouldn’t allow any African American to graduate from the Academy. Demerits reportedly “showered down” on Williams and any White Cadet-Midshipmen who supported him. Nonetheless, he was rated as good officer material, and one instructor remarked he was a “wide awake, intelligent, and seri-



Rear Admiral Richard T. McNulty, USMS, “Father of the Academy.”

Pers 8-5/15B6

WAR SHIPPING ADMINISTRATION  
Training Organization  
U. S. MERCHANT MARINE ACADEMY  
Kings Point, New York

43-3934

Not in USNR

5 June, 1944

Date

To: S-CC

Subject: Transfer, Assignment, Leave of Absence, or Termination of Service of Cadet-Midshipman.

Reference: (a) Regulations.

1. You are hereby notified that  
Cadet-Midshipman ~~WILLIAMS, Joseph B., D-1~~  
presently in status indicated:

(1) At USMMA ~~XXXX~~

*USMMA paperwork from the time of Williams's graduation. Not only does it contain the note "Not in USNR," but the word "Midshipman" has been exed from the standard form.*

ous-minded young man." Apparently he had roommates, unlike Midshipman Brown at USNA, but so far their names have not emerged.

However, unlike other students at USMMA, Williams did not receive an appointment as a Midshipman, Merchant Marine Reserve, U.S. Navy Reserve (MMR-USNR). The Navy rejected



*Captain and officers of the new Liberty Ship SS Booker T. Washington after its maiden voyage to England on February 8, 1943. In the back row are two USMMA Midshipmen, T. J. Young and Eugene Hlubik. Captain Hugh Mulzac is fourth from the left on the first row, wearing glasses.*



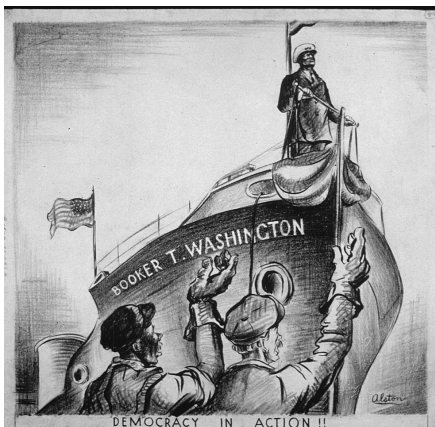
his application in March 1943 nominally because his “qualifications are not sufficiently in line with present requirements to warrant your appointment.” Academy documents did not refer to him as a “Cadet-Midshipman,” but simply as a “Cadet.” In some standardized forms, clerks struck out the word “Midshipman.” In an official photo of Williams, he does not wear the distinctive MMR-USNR wings on his uniform. Nonetheless, Williams was a USMMA cadet and went on to complete the most distinctive element of a Kings Point education: Sea Year.

Williams’s Sea Year experience was both historic and extraordinary. He signed on board the SS *Booker T. Washington*, a brand-new Liberty ship operated by Luckenback Steamship Company, as the Deck Cadet on May 8, 1943. The ship’s purser noted that Williams was a hard worker, standing watch on the bow, taking his turn at the ship’s wheel, busting rust, while in his off time he studied navigation and engineering in preparation for his life exam.

It is important to understand the significance of the ship on which Williams served. The *Booker T. Washington* was a part of the federal government’s efforts to bring the nation’s African American community into the war effort. The California Shipbuilding Corporation built it at Terminal Island, Los Angeles. African American opera star Marian Anderson christened the Liberty ship at its launching on September 29, 1942. It was the first ship named after a Black American, and its master, Captain Hugh N. Mulzac, was the first African American to command a U.S. merchant ship in World War II. The War Shipping Administration (WSA) offered Mulzac



*Cadet but not a Midshipman: Joseph B. Williams at USMMA. Note the absence of MMR-USNR wings on his uniform.*



*This cartoon, entitled "Democracy in Action," emphasized the role Capt. Hugh Mulzac and the ship Booker T. Washington had in promoting diversity.*

command of the ship and an all-Black crew. But Mulzac balked, decrying the offer as a racially segregated "Jim Crow" ship. He demanded and eventually received permission for a mixed-race crew, ensuring that Whites would have to obey the orders of Black officers. From the start, the *Booker T. Washington* had USMMA cadets on board. Cadet-Midshipmen Ted Young and Louis Albi, both White, were involved in a brawl ashore when a drunk accosted them for sitting at the same table with a man of color, using the crudest and most offensive

language possible. When Louis Albi left the ship in New York City, the Academy sent Cadet Eugene Hlubik to replace him.

Eventually, and perhaps inevitably on a ship intended to foster better racial relations, Cadet Williams reported for duty on the *Booker T. Washington* and sailed for the Mediterranean. Mulzac and Williams worked well together. Williams remembered his captain as a "demanding taskmaster," but one who taught him "how to be a qualified officer." Mulzac recorded Williams as "a very fine lad." The *Booker T. Washington* returned to the U.S. in September, 1943, when Williams had a few days ashore, then returned



*This portrait of Hugh Mulzac was done by Charles Dawson, a Black USMMA employee.*



to the same ship. On December 20, 1943, Mulzac promoted him to Acting Third Mate, and he remained in that capacity until he left the ship on March 12, 1944 and returned to USMMA to prepare to sit for his license.

In his memoir *A Star to Steer By*, Mulzac noted that Williams graduated from Kings Point only after a “rough struggle.” The U.S. Navy was a significant part of Williams’s struggle. Because he wanted to go on active duty in the Navy, a desire he had expressed even in his early childhood, he had to apply for a commission and stated a preference for serving on a destroyer escort. USMMA’s second Superintendent, Rear Admiral Giles Stedman, USMS, fully supported this application. What Williams had not understood was what Captain Mulzac called the “caste system” that excluded



*Ensign Joseph B. Williams, USNR, was the first African American officer in the Seabees.*

Williams from attending USNA and continued to obstruct his entry into that branch of military service. The Navy initially balked at his application, rejecting it because “the quota of officer personnel for applicants with your qualifications has been filled.” Given that Williams graduated from USMMA in June 1944, when the war was at its peak and there was a huge demand for qualified officers, this statement is nonsensical. While the Navy did eventually commission Williams, it didn’t do so until July 3, 1944—a full month after he graduated. The Navy clearly did not want a Black watchstanding officer on its ships. Despite his maritime

experience and Coast Guard license, the Navy assigned Williams to a landbound Seabee unit serving on Ulithi Atoll in the Pacific. As of June 1, 1945, Williams was one of only 36 male and two female Black officers in the entire Navy.

Following his discharge on June 9, 1946, Williams went to law school at New York University. He had just started practicing law when the Navy called him up for service in the Korean War in 1950. Williams ultimately achieved the rank of Lieutenant in the Navy. Once back in New York, he resumed his legal practice before becoming a judge. Williams served on the New York State



*The 1994 dedication of the Joseph B. Williams Midshipman Activities Center was attended by alumni and midshipmen. Clockwise, starting with the gentleman in the blue sweater are: Willis Williams ('75), Erin Gantt ('83), James Williams ('69), Rodney Gregory ('74), Darel Jenkins ('80), Marc Shuler ('92), Robert Johnson ('62), Grover Barnett ('74), Stephanie Tanner ('85). The midshipman in the combination cover is Gregory Clay ('95); the midshipman wearing the garrison cap is Luis Belgrave ('95), and the gentleman in the ballcap is Ken Guscott ('54).*

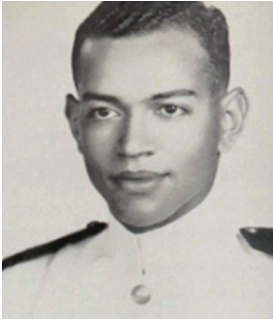
Supreme Court from 1977 until his retirement in 1991. He became an Administrative Judge of the Criminal Courts in 1982, and in 1986 joined the State Supreme Court's Appellate Team. He served as the Head of New York City's Family and Criminal Courts and headed the Model Cities Program with a mission to improve life in the inner city. He was also a co-founder of the Coalition of Blacks in the Courts.

Like other alumni, Williams frequently credited his success to his Kings Point experience as "giving him the framework to live a disciplined life." In 1981, he founded the Hugh N. Mulzac Endowment Fund in honor of his former captain. The fund supports programs for minority students at the Academy. Among many other awards, in 1979, Judge Williams received the Alumni Association's Outstanding Professional Achievement Award. Williams retired to

Virginia where he died on April 15, 1992. His obituary noted that he was "a man of strong character, unflinching principle and supreme dedication to the rights of the oppressed." In 1994, the Midshipmen Activities Center in Land Hall was named in his honor, and the Alumni Association made him the very first inductee in its Hall of Distinguished Graduates.

## ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

USMMA would not have another African American cadet graduate until 1951 when both Joseph T. Stewart, Jr. and Thomas Emmanuel Nelson, Jr., a foreign national from Haiti, graduated. This section focuses on four of the approximately twelve Black alumni from the 1950s and early 1960s classes, Joseph T. Stewart, Jr. ('51), Sidney A. Thompson ('52), Kenneth Guscott ('54), and Joe Scroggins, Jr. ('63), as exemplars of success. Those African American midshipmen who followed in their path truly have stood on the shoulders of giants.



*Joseph T. Stewart, Jr. ('51), was USMMA's second African American graduate.*

Fewer than twenty African American cadets graduated in total from 1944 to 1969. The number of Black cadets attending Kings Point before 1970 was small. Most years saw one or two graduates per class but sometimes there were none. Anecdotal evidence indicates that about half of all Black cadets/midshipmen attending the Academy during that period did not complete the program.

Joseph Stewart had the distinction of graduating from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., the nation's first public high school for Black students.

His daughter, Alison Stewart, wrote a history of Dunbar in which she recounted her father was tall, athletic, smart, and, even as a teen, actively worked against racial segregation. Stewart was highly individualistic, however, and he bristled at instructions to be "a credit to our race," asking,

Why should that be a consideration? That I have to be a credit to my race? I need to be a credit to myself as an individual because people ought to not be looking at my race, they ought to be looking at me as an individual.

Stewart recalled some difficulties regarding race at USMMA and even during his Sea Year. However, unlike Joe Williams, he proudly wore the distinctive MMR-USNR wings on his uniform as the Navy modified its racial policies after World War II. Stewart graduated with honors, but instead of sailing, attended Harvard Business School as a John Hay Whitney Fellow. He quickly climbed

the corporate ladder, starting at Warner-Lambert Pharmaceuticals before joining the Squibb Corporation in 1968, where he became senior vice president and member of the board of directors before retiring in 1990. He then served for nine years as an executive consultant to the vice chairman of Johnson & Johnson. Stewart did not forget his alma mater, serving as a trustee of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Alumni Foundation and becoming a frequent donor. He died of pancreatic cancer on April 2, 2009, and was buried in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, a historic resort for affluent African Americans.

Sidney A. Thompson left an excellent record of his life and experience at USMMA in a lengthy interview with oral historians at UCLA in 2009. Thompson had Caribbean roots, but grew up primarily in Los Angeles. Since his youth he wanted to go to sea, and he was encouraged in this endeavor by a chance meeting with Captain Hugh Mulzac. Like Joe Williams, Thompson wanted to go to



*Sidney Thompson ('52) was another Midshipman influenced by Hugh Mulzac.*

USNA, but found they “weren’t taking folks that looked like us,” and decided USMMA offered a good alternative. A precocious student, Stewart graduated from high school at age sixteen. Since USMMA wouldn’t take anyone younger than seventeen, he spent a year at UCLA. During this time he applied to USMMA in part because he knew there had already been African American graduates there. While he passed USMMA’s written exam without difficulty, the U.S. Navy threatened to block his ambitions. A Navy physician failed him for a specious dental issue. Thompson successfully appealed the

decision, and reported to Kings Point in 1947. He loved his time at the Kings Point, recalling it “was a pure joy except for dealing with southern white midshipmen, which was a problem.” Thompson found that the way USMMA handled African Americans was fair, and “the other academies weren’t doing that.” The Academy was “a good experience for me. I never regretted a day of doing it. It allowed me to go to sea, and I had to get that out of my system, and I did.”



*Sidney A. Thompson ('52) found the officers on SS Mormacrey refused to make his Sea Year a meaningful experience for an African American such as himself. USMMA soon transferred him to a different vessel.*

Thompson's Sea Year experience however, was less happy. The officers on his first ship essentially banished him from the wheelhouse, and relegated him to menial tasks. Word of this got back to USMMA, which reassigned him to a Grace Lines ship with officers who treated him fairly. After graduation the Navy called him up for active duty during the Korean War. He became an educator and ultimately the Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1992, the first African American to hold that position, which oversaw the second largest school district in the nation, with 700,000 students and an annual budget over \$8 billion. He was an avid supporter of USMMA, served on the USMMA Board of Advisors and received the Alumni Outstanding Professional Achievement Award in 2003. He passed away in Los Angeles on December 2, 2023, aged 92.

Kenneth Guscott was another successful graduate. Born in 1925 to Jamaican immigrant parents in Roxbury, Massachusetts, at age 17 he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces. He served in World War II, where he repeatedly faced racism, including the rescinding of his admission into the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. After leaving the service, he took the exam to enter USMMA and passed with flying colors.



Guscott arrived at USMMA in 1950 and studied marine engineering, likely making him the first African American engineering alumnus. Unlike Joe Stewart, he was determined to be a credit to his race, revealing in a 2008 interview conducted by Northeastern University that:

I went to Kings Point because I said, I am going to show these White so and so's that Black people had the brains and the power to do it. I went through Kings Point and creamed the place. The reason why is because every time we took a test, I said, I wanted to show them that Black men knew how to do mathematics. I said, Black people from Roxbury are going to be proud of me. I was like, sure. So that was really one of the times in my life, and it was Roxbury. I said, we are going, my mother was still living in Roxbury. I said, we are going to show them. That has driven me my entire life.



*Kenneth Guscott ('54) was the first African American to graduate from USMMA with an engineering license.*

That drive helped Guscott graduate fifth in his class. After graduation, he sailed before working in the Fore River Shipyard, constructing the world's first nuclear surface warship, the USS *Long Beach*. From there, he attended nuclear engineering training and quickly worked his way up the corporate ladder at General Dynamics.

Guscott was also a civil rights activist: in 1969, he became president of the New England branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). That same year he co-founded a real estate development company with his brothers. They specialized in working with minority investors and supporting Black owned businesses. One former employee recalled, "He had the most minority hires, not only with construction workers, but also in terms of subcontractors, architects, suppliers and other professionals." His construction projects were always comprised of at least 80 percent minority workers and services: "He didn't just talk about minority hiring. He made it happen," which sounds a lot like the "acta non verba" spirit so pervasive in USMMA graduates. Guscott was also a faithful alumnus. He helped design a minority



*Left to right: Commander Paul Krinsky ('50), USMS, Assistant Dean, Midshipman Milton Irvin ('71), and Kenneth Guscott ('54) and his staff from the New England branch of the NAACP discuss the Academy's minority recruitment programs circa 1970.*

recruitment program for Kings Point. In 1979, the Alumni Association awarded Guscott its Outstanding Professional Achievement Award. He died in a tragic house fire in 2017.

Joe Scroggins, Jr. ('62) perhaps had the most influence in making USMMA more welcoming to minorities, returning to campus six years after his graduation as a recruiting officer and assistant dean. Scroggins wanted to become an architect, but his high school counselor persuaded him to apply to USMMA. Attracted by the idea of international travel, working aboard ships, and a free education, he applied and was accepted. Scroggins was one of three African American Plebes in his class. Arriving in 1959, Scroggins described himself as "lost and lonely" and wondered if he had made the right decision. Conversely, in a 2003 interview he recalled he was just "one of the gang" as a midshipman. He didn't experience many problems, except for finding a barber outside of the Academy who could cut his hair properly, and it irked him that it was hard to date Black women. Furthermore, Scroggins's Sea Year experience was

overwhelmingly positive, and he graduated determined to sail on his license and claw his way up to Master despite mediocre grades. Unlike many of the earlier African American graduates from the Academy, Scroggins intended to spend his career at sea. Scroggins sailed first with the Military Sea Transportation Service (the predecessor to Military Sealift Command) and later with United States Lines, eventually getting his Chief Mate's license.

Thanks to the civil rights movement, by 1969 the U.S. government actively promoted minority recruitment at all the federal service academies. There had been minor advances at the Academy, such as in 1967 when Donald E. Baul ('67) won the "Character Cup," which went to the graduating senior who demonstrated the highest levels of personal character and integrity. Baul had also served as the Second Battalion's Executive Officer. James N. Williams ('68) was the first African American to edit the Academy's student newspaper, *Hear This*. The Academy passed another milestone in 1969 when it hired its first Black faculty member, Kenneth O. Bantum, who joined as an assistant professor in the Physical Education Department with the rank of Lieutenant. Bantum had competed in the 1956 Olympics, finishing fourth in men's shot put. Nonetheless, the number of African Americans attending or working at the Academy remained minuscule.

The Academy's alumni were not remiss in advocating change, either. In the July 1969 issue of the *Kings Pointer*, Ron Coles ('62) asked three pointed questions about minority recruitment:

1. What efforts, if any, have been made to secure Academy appointments for black students, other than athletic recruitment?
2. Have Academy representatives spoken at any ghetto high schools in reference to the previous question?
3. How many black and/or Puerto Rican cadets will enter the Academy this Fall?

The editor of the *Kings Pointer*, USMMA's alumni magazine, made inquiries and gave a lengthy response, likely based on information from Commander Paul Krinsky, USMS ('50), who then served as Assistant Dean. The reply admitted that past efforts to recruit African Americans had yielded only meager results. Academy Training Representatives (ATRs) visited high schools in Black communities and admissions officers attended events for college

bound African Americans, usually accompanied by a Black midshipman. The response to the third question is also instructive, "This year, in the Class of 1973, three black students and one Puerto Rican student entered the Academy. Two other Negro students won principal appointments but declined, to attend other schools (Air Force Academy and Yale)." The last point is important. Applicants good enough for USMMA frequently chose to attend more famous universities or the larger service academies.

In 1969, the Department of Commerce offered Scroggins a position in USMMA's Admissions Office with the title of Assistant Dean and rank of Commander, USMS. Exhausted from a recent voyage to Vietnam, Scroggins accepted the offer. Blessed with a generous budget and the support of Assistant Dean Krinsky, he set to work finding candidates for the Academy, traveling as far away as Alaska. His first year was hugely successful, with twenty-two Black candidates entering the class of 1974. Maritime Administrator Andy Gibson (later an Assistant Secretary of Commerce) was an important ally for Scroggins, providing him with almost unlimited funding to recruit African American high schoolers.

Scroggins developed the operation of a nationwide minority group recruiting program, including working closely with state and federal congressional representatives for sponsorship. Scroggins concluded that the basic problem was that "many are unaware that the Academy exists. Others do not know how to get an appointment, and still others hesitate to apply, believing the Academy is an 'all white' college."

Scroggins aimed to double the number of Black Plebes to over forty and wanted to extend his efforts to Hispanics and Native Americans. It was an ambitious and worthy goal. As Scroggins put it, "The Merchant Marine Academy has always bridged the gap between adolescence and manhood," and "Now we're bridging



*Assistant Professor of Physical Education Ken Bantum (left) was USMMA's first African American faculty member. Shown here circa 1970.*





*In 1971 Joe Scroggins won the Department of Commerce Silver Medal for Meritorious Federal Service for his recruiting activities at Kings Point.*

Conoco, Inc., before the Secretary of Commerce appointed him to USMMA's Advisory Board. After 1980, he worked in various maritime companies in Houston until 1990, when he took charge of the Tampa Port Authority in Florida. In 1994, President Bill Clinton appointed him a Federal Maritime Commissioner. In 1998, Scroggins became an independent consultant in the maritime industry. That same year the Alumni Association awarded him the Outstanding Professional Achievement Award. He passed away in Florida in 2008.

By 1970, the Academy seemed to be headed in the right direction. An article in *Commerce Today* entitled "Kings Point Comes Alive" focused on Scroggins's efforts to bring minority students to Kings Point and painted a rosy picture of the Academy's future. Progress had definitely been made, but much work remained to be done.

another gap—between minorities and white." African American alumni such as Captain Reginald McKamie ('75) credited Scroggins with introducing them to USMMA. He worked tirelessly to improve conditions for African Americans, obtaining training for the Academy's barbers to work with Black hair, having the Academy's Library subscribe to magazines like *Jet: The Weekly Negro News Magazine*, and working with local African American churches as sponsors for Black midshipmen to make them feel welcome. He also spent many long hours counseling midshipmen, encouraging them to stay at the Academy.

Scroggins remained at the Academy for three years. Encouraged by Judy Chadwick, who worked on Andy Gibson's staff, he applied to Harvard Business School. After Harvard, Scroggins was Assistant to the President and Economist for



## TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

The 1970s saw an enormous transformation in the demographics of the Regiment of Midshipmen. In 1970, twenty-two Black Plebe Candidates entered Vickery Gate. Nine graduated in 1974, the highest number of Black graduates in one year.

While the numbers of African Americans remained a tiny proportion of the Regiment, there certainly was some pushback from some White midshipmen, peaking in the mid- to late 1970s. There were incidents involving Confederate flags, complaints that Black midshipmen received a disproportionate number of demerits, or favoritism from Wiley Hall when brought before executive boards.

Midshipman Rodney Gregory ('74) published a letter in *Hear This* in February 1974 that claimed upperclassmen were frequently racist, that Blacks faced harassment because of haircuts, and that when too many African Americans sat together at meals, "it was seen as a Black power meeting" and broken up. Gregory had also experienced racism during Sea Year, with a ship captain who told him, "I don't like Blacks," and relegated the cadet to the most demeaning jobs possible. Gregory called out his fellow African Americans for not publicly confronting bigotry, claiming the "biggest problem Blacks have at Kings Point is Uncle Tomism. Because there are Uncle Toms among our small community it is hard to have unity." Gregory also recalls that some White midshipmen didn't like the idea of taking orders from Black midshipmen officers:



*Training Plebe Candidate Machel "Mike" Monley, Jr., how to salute during Indoc, circa 1969. Note the unpopular dungaree garrison cover.*

At one point, we received threatening messages and had to be on alert in case things got physical. Several of us devised a method to alert each other if trouble came. We even enlisted the help of several black Academy maintenance staff who would come to our aid when called. Things were pretty tense, so we went to Commandant Knutsen and told him our story. I seem to

remember that he put out a message to the regiment and called in the regimental staff. He read the riot act to the regiment to knock it off or people would be thrown out of the academy. Things calmed down after that.

Despite racial tensions, Black midshipmen consistently found their way into regimental positions. Reginald McKamie ('75) for example, became Regimental Executive Officer (RX), but was not promoted to Regimental Commander (RC) because the Academy was "not ready."

Racial grumblings continued to surface in the pages of *Hear This*. White allies such as the RC at the time, David Gilmartin ('78), in conjunction with other regimental officers, published a letter in the June 23, 1978, issue in which he concluded that the responsibility for the handful of incidents lay not with the Academy's administration but within the Regiment of Midshipmen. Gilmartin and the Command Board urged midshipmen to moderate their behavior and act professionally.

Another advance for Kings Point was that it became the first federal service academy to admit women. In 1974, the first fifteen female Plebe Candidates arrived for Indoc. Eight graduated with their class in 1978, including three women of color: Rochon Greene, Meredith Neizer, and Frances Yates.

Haircuts were again an issue. Joe Scroggins had some success in training the Academy's barbers to work with male midshipmen's African American hairstyles, but no preparation was made for women in 1974. Without warning, the women marched with the rest of the Plebes to the barbers, and most of their hair was cut off. Yates said of the experience, "I was sad and I am sure I cried, but what was I going to do? The hair was already gone and I knew it would grow back."

By the 1980s, USMMA's African American graduates were leaving their mark on the world. Beyond Williams, Stewart, Guscott, and Scroggins, alumni were climbing the professional ranks. Edward S.G. Dennis, Jr. ('67) sailed for a few years before going to law school and rising to Assistant Attorney General in the U.S. Justice Department. Milton Irvin ('71) attended Wharton Business School and enjoyed a highly successful career as an investment banker. All credited USMMA with developing their leadership abilities.



*Plebe candidates Della Anholdt, Rochon Greene, and Terry Olsen await in-processing at INDOC, July 1974. In the background are Kathy Jarvis, Meredith Neizer, and Kathy Metcalf.*

Something new for African American graduates from the early 1970s and after is that they increasingly chose to sail commercially and were now making their mark in the maritime industry. The first Black alum to achieve Master Unlimited was Avis Bailey ('72), who received his Master's license in July 1979 and joined Chesapeake Bay Pilots that same year. Rodney Gregory received his Master's license in 1986 but continued to sail as a mate. The first Black alumnus to sail as a Master Unlimited Tonnage was Reginald McKamie ('75). He received his Master's license in October 1981 and first sailed as Master in August 1987 on the tanker *Exxon North Slope*. The first Black alumnus to sail on his Chief Engineer's license was Machel Monley, Jr. ('73), who sailed for Sun Oil. Co. Piloting proved to be a popular career for several Black alumni. Besides Avis Bailey on the Chesapeake, the first in Houston was Paul Brown ('77), and the first in Baton Rouge was Kelvin Boston ('76). Another historic landmark was achieved in 1990 when Rodney Gregory returned to USMMA as a member of the faculty in the Marine Transportation Department. As he recalls, it was "a pretty cool experience." He then moved on to become Vice President of Operations at Red River Shipping Company, along with Del Lewis ('83). At the time it was the only Black-owned shipping company in the U.S.



*Commander Emmanuel Jenkins, USMS, Director of Candidate Recruiting, shaking hands with M/N Reginald McKamie for receiving an Academic Gold Star, circa February, 1972.*

Black female graduates also rose rapidly in the maritime industry. Meredith Neizer ('78), Chief Logistics Officer for ARMADA credited her parents, recalling in a November 2023 interview on *The Freight Pod*:

It has to be part of my DNA to lead into change, and also lead into change For the advancement of women and people of color in the world, and that's what I do so at an early age your parents set the right example for you, one that you know adversity is not something to back down from and you know, while things maybe haven't been done a certain way before, it doesn't mean you can't be the forefront of instilling that change.

Neizer began her career as a Third Mate, sailing for Arco Marine, then worked for Exxon, spent a year as a White House Fellow, and then worked at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and Sea-Land Services. She has also been a strong advocate for women's issues, serving on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) and later serving as a member of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces. Her career path wasn't always easy, but Neizer recalls,

Usually, as an African American woman, I had, like everyone has, run into the glass ceiling, so but I think the thing, the skill that I really learned is when I hit the glass ceiling in any of the organizations I was working for at the time, I always pause to say you've gained the skill. I can't get to where I want to get to, for whatever the reason was but I had always been good about pivoting and finding the organization and the job that put me back on track to something interesting or something that I wanted to do, and I think that gave me that skill of pivoting and willing to make a jump to another company.

Like many alumni, Neizer remains an advocate for USMMA: "I've always said that the education I received at Kings Point was the real platform for a long career. The discipline, military academy education, ability to juggle many priorities at once—as well as the leadership training and exposure you get over your Sea Year—all contribute to giving every graduate, including myself, a firm foundation to launch a career no matter what direction you take it in."

Kings Point graduates were making their mark in the Armed Forces, too. Frances Yates ('78) is another African American woman who found that her Kings Point education prepared her for a rewarding career. Like Neizer, she started as a Third Mate on oil tankers before her career branched out to shoreside positions in the private sector. She is arguably better known for her career as an



*CAPT Frances Yates ('78) swearing in Plebe Candidates on Acceptance Day, 2002.*

officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve, rapidly rising to the rank of Captain. Her last command was Military Sealift Command Northern Persian Gulf 102. Her retirement ceremony was held at USMMA in September 2002, during which she administered the oath of office to incoming Plebe Candidates. Since then, she has continued as a marine charterer at Hess Corporation.

Black Alumni have also experienced rewarding careers as active-duty officers. Colonel Gary S. Graham, U.S. Marine Corps





*COL Gary S. Graham ('83), USMC, flew fighter aircraft and commanded Aircraft Group 41 during his long career.*

('83), accumulated over 4500 flight hours and 175 carrier landings, first flying A-6E Intruders and later F/A-18 Hornets. His decorations include the Legion of Merit with gold star, the Meritorious Service Medal with gold star, the Air Medal with seven strike flight awards, Navy Commendation Medal, and the Navy Achievement Medal. When he retired in 2009, he was the Commander of Marine Aircraft Group 41 in Fort Worth, Texas.

While USMMA continued to produce African American graduates who had impressive careers, the Academy struggled to attract more Black midshipmen. After Joe Scroggins left in 1973, his replacements, Commander Emmanuel Jenkins and Lieutenant Commander Bruce Grigsby, USMS, carried on the effort, but nonetheless, the numbers began to drop. In response, Jenkins and Grigsby initiated a new recruitment tool, the Kings Point Information Representative Program. In this program, alumni volunteers visited high schools to make college applicants more aware of USMMA. Twenty Black alumni stepped in to help, including William Mitchell ('52), Ken Guscott ('54), and John Silva ('63).

Nonetheless, the number of African American midshipmen continued to sag even as Washington insisted on a more diverse student body. Endless committee meetings, special minority recruitment brochures, press releases, persistent efforts by the Admissions Office and Athletics Department, and the efforts of Black alumni have produced only meager results, none surpassing the Class of 1974's nine graduates half a century ago. African Americans represent 13.5 percent of the American population. If USMMA held itself to that percentage as a goal, out of roughly 270 Plebe Candidates that enter every year, more than thirty should be African Americans. There is no indication that this goal will be reached anytime soon.

## “STAY POSITIVE AND UPLIFT EACH OTHER”



*Captain Roshenda Josephs ('13) holding the certificate signed by President Biden recognizing her as the first first female African American captain at MSC.*

What does success look like for African Americans in the 2020s? Two examples illustrate that Kings Point's Black graduates continue to excel, as well as their commitment to assisting others to pursue a USMMA education and the career opportunities it offers: Roshenda Josephs ('13) and Zachary Mullins ('18).

Josephs has pursued a career with MSC with the goal of becoming captain as quickly as possible. She worked on a variety of vessels, including tankers, a cable layer, and high-speed vessels. She rapidly advanced her license and at 29 years old, earned her Unlimited Master's license. On June 19, 2021, the first time Juneteenth was recognized as a federal holiday commemorating the effective end of slavery in the U.S., Josephs received a very special award aboard the USNS *Choctaw County* (T-EPF 2). Signed by President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the award recognized Josephs as the first African American female Master at MSC.

*Below: USNS Choctaw County (T-EPF 2).*



Josephs recounts that “I’ve been pretty aggressive with sailing.” Captain Josephs now wants to reach out and help others. She is active as a mentor with Women Offshore, a nonprofit that focuses on empowering the careers of female seafarers worldwide. In a recent article, Josephs noted that she has not personally noticed any significant changes over the last decade regarding females and minorities at sea. She believes more could be done with a focus on recruiting, starting in high school and continuing through college, and recommended that companies have female representatives engage with students, especially at job fairs. Hopefully, she can transform her views into action. In May 2023, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg appointed her to USMMA’s Advisory Council to advocate for education curriculum development, diversity, equity and inclusion issues, and sexual assault prevention and response.

Zachary Mullins (‘18) successfully pursued a lifetime aviation goal and now flies F/A 18A fighter jets for the U.S. Marine Corps. While at USMMA, Mullins played men’s lacrosse in the 2018 Skyline Championship team. He was also the 2017-18 recipient of the Athletic Department’s Power of Inspiration Award, which recognizes midshipmen who inspire not only through words, but actions; who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work and translate that passion to others. In late 2023, Mullins was one of only five African American fighter pilots in the Marine Corps. The *Washington Post* recently ran a story that found over the past quarter-century, the number of Black Marines who fly fighter jets has fallen from an all-time high of fifteen in 2000 to just five today, which represents less than one percent of the approximately 580 fighter pilots serving across the Marine Corps.



*CAPT Zach Mullins (‘18) is one of only five African Americans who fly fighters for the Marine Corps.*

The report found Mullins philosophical about his standing as a rare African American in an elite position. “I wouldn’t say I’d settled into being the minority in the group, but I think it’s a statistic that I’m



*Quinci Elphinstone ('23), in a photograph dating to 2021. She encourages African American midshipmen to "stay positive and uplift each other."*

not unfamiliar with," Mullins said. "As I matured, I realized what that meant. And I do think I carry a little bit of extra intentionality with the way ... I conduct myself, because I do know that I might be the only Black guy in the room."

Josephs and Mullins are just two representatives of the success of African American alumni. USMMA's African American alumni have demonstrated a deep commitment to advocating for a larger African American presence at Kings Point when they formed the Kings Point Black Alumni Society (KPBAS). In February 2023, as the culmination of the Academy's Black History

Month observances, three of its members, Captain Reginald McKamie ('75), Robert Johnson ('62), and Rodney Caines ('97), spent the day meeting with midshipmen, faculty, and staff in support of USMMA's diversity recruitment, campus culture, minority mentorship and career development. African American midshipmen enthusiastically endorsed that goal. Midshipman DeMarcus Spivey remarked how helpful and motivating it was to meet with members of the Black Alumni Society. Then First Class Midshipman Quinci Elphinstone ('23), added, "they reminded us we aren't alone; we just have to stay positive and uplift each other."

Anecdotal evidence and the actions of African American alumni attest to the importance of connecting Black midshipmen with mentors and role models with whom they can identify. Alumni like Ken Guscott and Joe Scroggins understood this in the 1960s and did their best to recruit more minority midshipmen. Midshipmen like Milton Irvin understood this when, as a midshipman officer in 1971, he summoned a terrified Plebe Rod Gregory to his room on Reg Row to encourage him to "hang in there because it gets better." Twenty years later, Gregory, as a faculty member, made a point



*Like many alumni, Darel Jenkins ('80) returned to USMMA for his wedding at the Mariners' Memorial Chapel.*

of greeting African American Plebe Candidates such as Bedouin Joseph ('95) when he arrived on campus. Notably, Joseph became the first African American RC.

However, role models are scarce on American commercial ships. Rod Gregory recalls that during his Sea Year, his shipmates frequently said he was the first Black cadet they ever saw. Many African American Kings Pointers find themselves the only Black officer on the ships they serve on. Darel Jenkins ('80) recalls only coming across one other Black Chief Engineer during his long and successful career at sea. He remembers

It wasn't easy to have the confidence to rise to the chief engineer level without seeing anyone else that looked like me. If you don't see any examples, you don't think that you can do it. The experience of working for a Black Chief Engineer gave me the confidence to believe that there was a chance that I could one day be a chief engineer."

After he received a promotion to Chief Engineer on the *Maersk Utah*, Jenkins walked into the Engine Control Room, where the Wiper, who happened to be Black, greeted him with pride, "Good Morning, Chief." The Wiper was smiling from ear to ear, filled with



pride to see the first Black engineer in his life. Jenkins noted, “I continued to receive that same reaction from all of the people of color that I worked with as Chief.”

In sum, USMMA’s African American midshipmen have experienced remarkable professional success, from Joe Williams to the present day. It took grit, skill, and perseverance for them to overcome isolation, opposition, and indifference to arrive at professional prominence. Despite this level of success, the word still doesn’t seem to have gotten out that USMMA is an avenue to challenging and rewarding careers for its African American graduates. As Captain Reginald McKamie has said, our goal should be to have “an Academy that looks like America and an industry that looks like the Nation it serves.”



*The Midshipman Campus Diversity Club (CDC) strives to support diversity initiatives on campus, including racial issues. Photo taken in February, 2024.*

**Back row:** M/N Morgan Falanga, Andrew Zalescik, DeMarcus Spivey, Bryce Bristow, Sungwoo Bae

**Second row:** M/N Jalen Douglas and Abigail Stramski, Plebe Brayden Parson

**Front row:** M/N Kaira Winston, Plebe Jade Winters, M/N Shea Curran.



*Alumni and midshipmen, September 11, 2021.*

**Back row:** M/N Leon Wilson 1/C, M/N Sayra Raya 2/C, Darel Jenkins ('80), M?N Jalen Douglas 3/C, CAPT Emmanuel Jenkins, USMS (Ret.), Sophia Tucker, ('21), Frances Yates ('78), Sharon Brown ('86), Daryk Brown ('88)

**Front row:** M/N Xavier Coleman 2/C, M/N Mark Thompson 1/C, Kevin Rodgers, ('80), M/N Ian Blankenship 1/C, M/N Josh King 1/C.



## AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM

The American Merchant Marine Museum at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy collects, preserves, interprets, and displays heritage assets such as historical artifacts, records, documents, and art relevant to the post-1900 American maritime industry. The Museum educates midshipmen and the public regarding the Merchant Marine's contributions to our nation's heritage in both peace and war.

American Merchant Marine Museum  
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy  
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Kings Point, NY 11024

Email: [museum@usmma.edu](mailto:museum@usmma.edu)

Business Hours: 10:00 am-3:00 pm, Tuesday-Friday

Closed during Academy vacations



AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM