

# A CONNECTICUT CONNECTION

by Don Neal

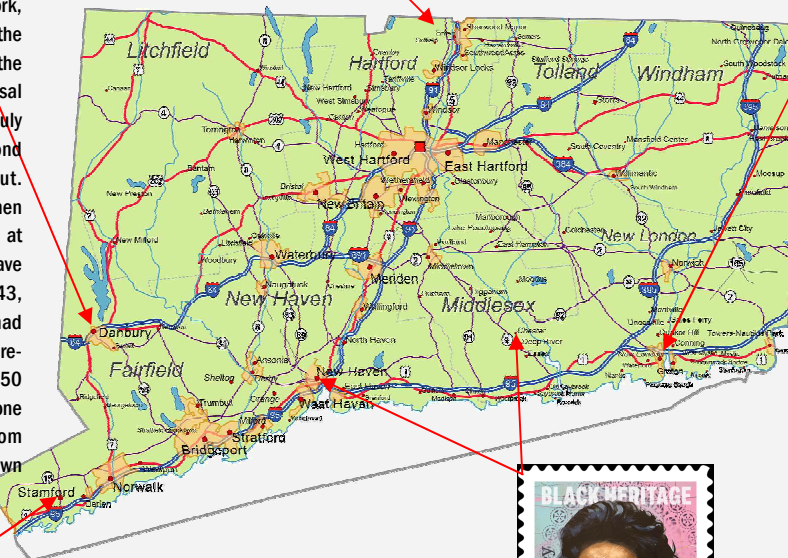
Some of the illustrious Black personalities commemorated on U. S. stamps have a Connecticut connection that may not be common knowledge. The following people have ties to the Connecticut communities of Danbury, Bethel, Enfield, New Haven, Chester, New London, and Stamford. Read on to learn who's connected to where.



In 1941, the most famous Black man in the world moved with his wife and son to a 12-room Colonial Revival house, called "The Beeches," at 1221 Enfield Street in the all-White town of Enfield, Connecticut. Built in 1903, it had four, tall, white columns, a pool, and servants' quarters. They bought the house on 2½ acres for \$19,000. Paul Robeson would call it home for the next 12 years. At that time, Robeson was at the height of his popularity as a singer and actor, famed for his roles in *The Emperor Jones* (which was the first feature sound film starring a Black American) *Show Boat*, and *Othello*. Robeson also was a political activist for civil rights and a communist sympathizer who suffered harassment, ostracism, and persecution for his beliefs. The FBI surveilled his Enfield house. The Ku Klux Klan made death threats against Robeson and his family. His was blacklisted in the United States during the McCarthy era, and his passport was revoked. Robeson made so little money during those years that he had to sell the Enfield house. It was put on the market for \$35,000 but didn't sell until 1953, when the price was dropped to \$22,000. The home, now privately owned and not open to the public, is included in the Enfield National Register Historic District and is on the Connecticut Freedom Trail.

In 1940, seeking a retreat away from the public eye, Marian Anderson and architect Orpheus H. "King" Fisher purchased a three-story Victorian farmhouse on a 100-acre farm in Danbury, Connecticut, after an exhaustive search throughout New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Through the years, Fisher built many structures on the property, including an acoustic rehearsal studio he designed for Anderson. On July 17, 1943, Anderson became the second wife of Fisher in Bethel, Connecticut. Fisher had asked her to marry him when they were teenagers, but she declined at that time because she feared it would have forestalled her music career. From 1943, she resided at the farm that Fisher had named Marianna Farm. The property remained Anderson's home for almost 50 years. In 1996, the farm was named one of 60 sites on the Connecticut Freedom Trail. The studio was moved to downtown Danbury as the Marian Anderson studio.

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"It is by no means a grateful task to abolitionize Connecticut. As a state, it will probably be the last to be reformed," wrote Frederick Douglass, the famed orator, freedom fighter, and abolitionist, in the May 26, 1848 edition of his newspaper, *The North Star*. He had just returned home to Rochester, New York from a speaking tour that included four lectures at Dart's Hall in New London. He continued, "The last two meetings in New London were an exception to this description. The audience manifested a deeper interest in the subject than I had hitherto seen in any part of Connecticut. I think New London about the best part in the state." Three weeks after Douglass spoke in New London, on June 12, 1848, the general assembly abolished slavery in Connecticut, making it the last New England state to do so. Despite Douglass's expressed concern that it was not "a grateful task to abolitionize Connecticut," Connecticut may owe Douglass a debt of gratitude for helping bring abolition to fruition.



Integrating Major League baseball in 1947 was just one of the challenges facing Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers' great second baseman. By 1954, Jackie and Rachel Robinson and their three children lived in the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens, New York, alongside such illustrious neighbors as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Roy Campanella, and Count Basie. It was a nice, middle-class neighborhood, but Jackie and Rachel wanted to rear their children in the country. Rachel also wanted more

privacy. But buying a house in Connecticut's White suburbs, Robinson faced yet another challenge, encountering resistance from brokers and real estate agents. Dick and Andrea Simon stepped in. Dick co-founded the Simon & Schuster publishing company, and their daughter Carly became a famous singer-songwriter. As soon as Rachel saw the land overlooking the reservoir at 103 Cascade Road in Stamford, she decided she wanted to live there. The Robinsons built their home without incident, and Jackie Robinson would live in Stamford until his death in 1973 at the age of 53. His family eventually sold the Robinson home in 1984, and today, the town of Stamford honors one of its most famous residents with a town park named after Jackie Robinson, which contains a full-size statue of the beloved ballplayer. The park is a site on the Connecticut Freedom Trail. On July 19, 2023, Rachel Robinson turned 101. She currently resides on a 60-acre farm in Salem, Connecticut.



Constance Juanita Baker married Joel Motley Jr., a real estate and insurance broker, in 1946 at Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut. They lived in Harlem, New York City, and in 1965, purchased a 10-room colonial house built in 1745 on eight acres on Cedar Lake Road in Chester, Connecticut as a secondary residence, purchased to allow her to be closer to her family in New Haven, where she was born in 1921. On weekends, holidays, and vacations, Motley, her husband, and son Joel III traveled to the Chester home which was maintained until her death in 2005. Constance Baker Motley's funeral was held at the Connecticut church where she had been married. In 2019 the State Historic Preservation Office formally dedicated the Chester property as the Connecticut Freedom Trail's 140th site.