

Who was ... Ethel Payne?

Ethel Lois Payne, journalist

Born: 1911, Chicago, IL

Died: 1991, Washington, DC

Known as the “First Lady of the Black press,” Ethel Payne was born in Chicago, the 5th of 6 children. Her father was a Pullman porter and her mother was a stay-at-home mother who became a Latin teacher when her husband died. Ms. Payne enjoyed a long career as a journalist. Her longest job (1951-1978) was with the [Chicago Defender](#), a prominent Black newspaper that was founded in 1905 and is still in operation covering “the interests of the urban African American community with culturally relevant content not regularly serviced by mainstream media.” The Defender proved to be a good match for Ms. Payne. During an interview shortly before her death she said:



“I stick to my firm, unshakeable belief that the black press is an advocacy press and that I, as a part of that press, can’t afford the luxury of being unbiased ... when it comes to issues that really affect my people, and I plead guilty, because I think that I am an instrument of change.”

Six things to know about Ethel Payne

1. She helped organize the first (1942) “March on Washington.” After meeting A. Phillip Randolph, who was organizing the march with the goal of ending discrimination in the military, Ms. Payne helped organize Chicago participants for the march. The march was called off when President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive that banned discrimination in the federal government and its defense contractors. Desegregation of the military came after the war, in 1948.
2. Her career as a journalist instead began with a journal. In 1948 she took a job coordinating recreational activities for Black servicemen in Japan and began a journal describing the experiences of those Black soldiers. A reporter for the *Chicago Defender* read her journal, was impressed with her writing and observational skills and recommended her for a job at the *Defender*, which she began in 1951.
3. As a member of the White House press corps, she was snubbed by the Eisenhower administration. During a 1954 press briefing (after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision), she asked the President whether the administration would support desegregation of the schools. The President thought her question was critical of his administration and he provided a terse answer. Prior to this, Ms. Payne had been called on frequently during press briefings but was seldom called on during later briefings.

4. She was the “first” in several notable ways: the first Black woman assigned to the White House Press corps; the first Black woman to cover the war in Viet Nam; and the first Black woman assigned as a commentator on a national media network when she was hired by CBS.
5. During her long career, she covered a variety of important events, both domestic and international. Domestic events included:
 - 1954: Montgomery Bus Boycott
 - 1957: Desegregation at Little Rock (AK) Central High School
 - 1963: University of Alabama desegregation
 - 1963: March on Washington
 - 1972: Symposium on Civil Rights, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas
 International events included:
 - 1955: Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries
 - 1957: Ghana independence ceremonies
 - 1966: Viet Nam war
 - 1968: World Council of Churches
 - 1969: Nigerian civil war
 - 1970: Secretary of State William Rogers 10-nation tour of African
 - 1970: Funeral of President William S. Tubman of Liberia
 - 1972: First Congress of the Popular Revolution Movement in the Republic of Zaire
 - South Africa apartheid
 - 1975: World Council of Churches, Nairobi, Kenya
 - 1980: Mid-Decade Conference, International Women’s Year Conference, Copenhagen, Sweden
 - 1983: World Conference on Peace & Disarmament, Prague, Czechoslovakia
 - 1983: 2nd Vienna Dialogue on Peace & Disarmament, Vienna, Austria
 - 1985: Closing Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Nairobi, Kenya
6. She became known for her hats. An example can be seen [HERE](#), on display at the Anacostia Museum or the Smithsonian Institute.

Honors and awards

The many awards Ms. Payne has received recognizing her long career include:

- 1952: First Prize by the Illinois Press Association for her series on adoptions
- 1956: World Understanding Award from the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations
- 1967: Named as one of the 100 Outstanding Black Women by Operation PUSH, Chicago
- 1973: First recipient of the Ida B. Wells Distinguished Journalism Chair at Fisk University
- 1980: Named Woman of Action for achievement in journalism by the National Association of the Negro Business and Professional Women’s Club
- 1980: Gertrude Johnson-Williams Award from Johnson’s Publishing Company
- 1982: Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Black Journalists

1983: Distinguished Service Award by Aficare, Washington, DC
1988: Candace Award from the Coalition of 100 Women
1988: Inducted into the Washington, D.C. Hall of Fame
1990: Kappa Tau Alpha Award from Hampton University
1993: The Ethel Payne Fellowship was established by the National Association of Black Journalists

To learn more about Ethel Payne

Each of the following short biographical articles emphasize different details of Ms. Payne's life and work.

1. Kovie Bialko (2023). [Pioneering Journalist Ethel Payne Wasn't Afraid to Stand Out](#). *Smithsonian*.
2. Ashlee Anderson (2018). [Ethel L. Payne, 1911-1991](#). *National Women's History Museum*.
3. [Ethel L. Payne 1911–1991](#). *Encyclopedia.com*.
4. Bené Viera (2018). [If this trailblazing journalist hadn't been a black woman, you would know her name](#). *Timeline*

The following book provides the complete story of Ms. Payne's life and work and describes the important part the Black press played in the Civil Rights Era in the US.

5. James McGrath Morris (2015). *Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press*. New York: Amistad.

This following link is to a series of 7 interviews conducted as part of the "Women in Journalism" project of the Washington Press Club. The interviews use Ms. Payne's own words to describe her own life and work.

6. Kathleen Currie (1987). [Interviews with Ethel Payne](#).

Each of the following videos both feature James McGrath Morris, author of a 2015 biography of Ms. Payne. In the first video, Mr. Morris, briefly describes her importance as a journalist. In the second video, Gwen Ifill interviews Mr. Morris about Ms. Payne's work as a journalist.

7. James McGrath Morris (2015). [Ethel Payne: First lady of the Black press](#).
8. Gwen Ifill (2015, video: 6:32). [Black Journal Ethel Payne Changed the National Agenda With coverage of Civil Rights](#). *PBS NewsHour*.