

# Black History Month Spotlight

## *Did You Know?*

### **Mahlon Van Horne (1840–1910)**

Mahlon Van Horne exemplified resilience, leadership, and commitment to equality. Born into a world grappling with slavery, Van Horne rose to become one of the most influential Black American figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a minister, state legislator, and diplomat, he broke barriers and paved the way for future generations in Rhode Island and beyond.

Mahlon Van Horne, born in 1840 in Princeton, New Jersey, grew up in an era when African Americans faced severe restrictions on opportunity. Undeterred, he attended Ashmun Institute (later Lincoln University), the nation's first historically Black college/university where he studied theology, education, and classical languages. Van Horne's journey took a pivotal turn when he moved to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1869. There, he became the pastor of the Union Congregational Church, one of the few racially integrated churches in the U.S., a position he held for over three decades. His sermons and commitment to social justice made him a respected figure in the community. Van Horne used his pulpit to inspire his congregation and advocate for civil rights and educational opportunities for Black Americans. His leadership extended beyond the church, as he became a vocal proponent of racial equality in Rhode Island.

In 1885, Van Horne made history by becoming the first Black American elected to the Rhode Island General Assembly. His election signaled a shift in the political landscape of the state. As a legislator, Van Horne championed causes that benefited marginalized communities, including education reform and voting rights. For instance, he led the passage of Rhode Island's 1885 Civil Rights Act that would support equal access to public accommodations.

Van Horne's influence extended beyond Rhode Island's borders. In 1896, President William McKinley appointed him as the U.S. Consul to St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) to strengthen ties between the U.S. and the Caribbean. This appointment made Van Horne one of the first Black Americans to serve in a diplomatic role.

Mahlon Van Horne was a trailblazer who broke racial barriers in religion, politics, and diplomacy, yet his name is far less recognized than other advocates for Black Americans' equal rights. Despite this, his contributions remain vital. Though history may not always give him his recognition, his efforts helped lay the foundation for the freedoms many of us enjoy today—especially in Rhode Island.

*Sources:*

Stokes, Keith W. 2023. "Opinion: The remarkable career of Mahlon Van Horne." The Providence Journal, January 14. Retrieved January 28, 2025 (<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/opinion/columns/2023/01/14/opinionstokes-recognition-due-for-the-remarkable-mahlon-van-horne/69791621007/>).

Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. 2021. "Reverend Mahlon Van Horne." Retrieved January 28, 2025 (<https://riheritagehalloffame.com/Reverend-Mahlon-Van-Horne/>).

***Black History is American History!***

A spotlight will be published every other week. Dr. Julian Culver ([julian\\_culver@brown.edu](mailto:julian_culver@brown.edu)) wrote the above spotlight. Have a spotlight to share? Newsletter submissions are due to Casey Wahl ([casey\\_wahl@brown.edu](mailto:casey_wahl@brown.edu)) Fridays by 11:00 am.