

Digital Review

Picturing Black History; Getty Images and Origins; <https://picturingblackhistory.org/>; Created in 2021; Access Date: September 21, 2023.

Picturing Black History: Photographs and Stories that Changed the World is a collaboration of Getty Images, the well-known company specializing in photographs, and *Origins, Current Events in Historical Perspective*. *Origins* is a website that provides “historical insight on current events that matter to the United States and to the world,” and is a project of the history department of Ohio State University in collaboration with the history department at Miami University. The racially diverse team behind *Picturing Black History* includes employees of Getty Images, history professors, graduate students, and an editorial board. According to the “About” section of the website, *Picturing Black History* “seeks to uncover untold stories and rarely seen images of the Black experience, providing new context around culturally-significant moments by bringing them into the light and into view.”

Developed in 2021, this project was inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and recognizes that Black Lives Matter is part of the ongoing Black freedom struggle. Its mission statement also says that the site is designed “to contribute to an ongoing public dialogue on the significance of Black history and Black life in the United States and throughout the globe.” In addition, the project seeks to challenge historic racial bias in the photographic industry.

The front page of the website has five large photographs with brief descriptions that rotate across the screen. These include underrecognized stories, including that of the pioneering queer performer Gladys Bentley. When you scroll down the front page, there are additional photographs with descriptions along with the claim that the website is promoting “Historic Photos, Fresh Stories.” However, not all the stories are fresh. Stories are included on the sit-in movement and the freedom rides, for instance, which are very well-known parts of the modern civil rights movement. The freedom rides story does offer an examination of the organization behind it, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a group often mentioned but not usually given focus.

The front page then includes photographs that you can click on under the heading “Most Popular.” Users must hover over them to get the descriptions of what they are about, however, and the descriptions can be too brief. Better would have been a more extended description; for instance, providing each photograph’s title and description when you hover over it to make it more readily apparent.



Pioneering Queer Performer Gladys Bentley. (Photo by Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images. Used by permission)

Then, a mission statement for the project follows, which seems buried and might be better just left in the “About” section of the website, where it is repeated.

The website has four clearly marked sections or tabs: “Read,” “Topics,” “Watch and Listen,” and “About,” which you can navigate at the top of the page. The “Read” section has a link to all the site’s stories, which currently number over forty-five, with a photograph and brief description to click on for each. There is also a link to a “Behind the Lens” section. However, it is not apparent from the website exactly what the content of this section is. You have to click on the photographs to find out more. Doing so reveals essays, more photographs, and information on archival collections.

On the “Watch and Listen” section, users can watch a YouTube video or listen to an audio recording of essay authors speaking about what “ignited” their “passion” for telling these stories of Black history. Each video and recording is transcribed, helpful for those who would rather read than watch or listen.

The “Topics” section is important for people looking for essays on particular subjects. Essays are broken down by topic: Biographies; Black Internationalism; Civil Rights; Culture and Sports; Education and Learning; Environment; Family and Community; Political Resistance and Engagement; Religion; Slavery; Reconstruction; and Jim Crow; War and Military; and Women, Gender, and Sexuality.

Of these, only Environment seemed unnecessary; the term is vague and only four essays are located in it, none of which meet a narrow definition of this term.

The “About” section is effective: it spells out the mission and purpose of the project, gives profiles of *Origins* and Getty Images along with photographs, and contains biographies of the project team. Photographs and profiles of the authors of the site essays are given with links to their work. The authors are primarily African American.

Overall, the design of the site has its strengths and weaknesses. Further refinement of its design would serve to further the site’s mission to educate the world on Black history through photographs and untold stories. To be sure, it is a relatively new site, launched in 2021, so it may be expected that it will take some time for kinks to be worked out.

The site claims to showcase “rarely seen images of the Black experience,” and, as a historian of the Black freedom struggle, I had only seen one or two of the images featured on the site before. Clearly, a strength of the site is its use of photographs and its ability to draw from Getty Images. The idea to use photographs, in particular, is timely in today’s increasingly visual age. As a history professor, I notice that my students are especially adept at analyzing images and seem to take significant interest in them. Photographs are a great way to connect across multiple generations.

Essays typically do look at underrecognized aspects of the Black experience, whether on new topics or new angles on familiar topics. The essays are fairly short with sources for more information. Some notable topics include Gladys Bentley (1907–60), the pioneering queer performer who bent gender norms before the 1940s in Harlem; “wade-ins” in Savannah by African Americans, leading the city to desegregate the beach; and a Black country club beauty pageant in Los Angeles in the 1920s and the white opposition that the country club faced.

To conclude, *Picturing Black History* has a lot of potential. It is already making a contribution through showcasing rarely seen photographs and untold stories, and more pictures and stories will no doubt be in its future. The project already has plans to publish two books with Abrams Books, the first in 2024 and the second, for a school-aged audience, in 2025.

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