

Ebony magazine began in 1945 because John H. Johnson understood that Black people were living full, complicated and successful lives that the mainstream press refused to show. Newspapers regularly associated Blackness with poverty, crime or racial conflict. Popular magazines centered white families, white beauty, white wealth and white achievement as though they represented all of America. Johnson decided Black America needed a major publication powerful enough to control its own image.

Johnson was born into poverty in Arkansas in 1918. He moved to Chicago with his mother during the Great Migration and eventually worked for a Black-owned insurance company. While working there, he studied the company president's reading material and noticed how magazines could gather people around shared interests. In 1942, Johnson borrowed \$500 using his mother's furniture as collateral and launched Negro Digest. The magazine condensed articles about Black life in a format inspired by Reader's Digest.

Negro Digest proved that a national Black readership existed, but Johnson wanted something larger, more visual and more ambitious. He studied Life magazine, which used large photographs and colorful layouts to show American culture. His next idea was essentially this: what if Black people had a Life magazine of their own?

The first issue of Ebony appeared in November 1945. Johnson's wife and business partner, Eunice Walker Johnson, helped choose the name. Ebony is a valuable dark-colored wood, so the word carried Blackness without sounding weak, apologetic or ashamed. The first printing reportedly consisted of 25,000 copies, and they sold out. The demand confirmed that Black readers had been waiting for a magazine that saw them as complete human beings.

Ebony showed Black doctors, teachers, lawyers, business owners, entertainers, athletes, political leaders, families and college students. It entered Black homes with photographs of elegant houses, successful marriages, beautiful clothing, graduations, vacations and professional achievement. These images may appear ordinary today, but they challenged a national media system that regularly acted as though accomplished Black people barely existed.

The magazine's positive approach did not mean pretending racism was gone. Ebony covered segregation, voting rights, housing discrimination, marches, political movements and racial violence. Its editors understood that Black life contained hardship, but they refused to let oppression become the only story. Black people were not merely victims suffering under white supremacy. They were thinkers, builders, parents, artists, workers, leaders and consumers creating lives under difficult conditions.

This created a real tension. Some critics believed Ebony sometimes presented Black success too carefully, concentrating on celebrities, wealthy families and respectable professionals while avoiding harsher arguments about class and racism. Others considered that positive presentation necessary because America already produced

more than enough degrading Black images. Ebony's strength and limitation often came from the same choice: it wanted Black readers to see possibility.

The magazine became a family record of Black advancement. A person could open Ebony and see Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color barrier, Dorothy Dandridge rising in Hollywood, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. leading a movement, Muhammad Ali challenging America, or a Black family purchasing a beautiful home. Ebony did not merely report that these people existed. Its photography gave them space, dignity and scale.

Lerone Bennett Jr., one of Ebony's most important editors and historians, pushed the magazine into deeper examinations of Black history and politics. His work challenged the watered-down version of American history commonly taught in schools. Through writers like Bennett, Ebony helped connect present-day Black life to slavery, Reconstruction, migration, resistance and civil-rights struggle.

Ebony and Jet served different purposes. Ebony was the larger monthly magazine, built around detailed stories, polished photographs, culture, politics, beauty and achievement. Jet, launched by Johnson Publishing in 1951, was smaller, cheaper and published weekly. It delivered news more quickly. Jet became especially important in 1955 when it published the photograph of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's mutilated body after his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted that the world see what had been done to her son. People sometimes credit Ebony with publishing that image, but it was Jet.

That photograph demonstrated why Black ownership of media mattered. Many white-controlled publications would not have shown the reality of Till's murder with the same urgency. Jet did not need permission from a white editor to decide whether Black suffering deserved national attention. The picture forced readers to confront the violence hidden beneath polite talk about segregation and helped energize the civil-rights movement.

Ebony also transformed advertising. Major companies wanted Black customers' money, but many refused to feature Black people in their advertisements. Johnson used Ebony's growing circulation as leverage. If corporations wanted access to the magazine's readers, they had to recognize those readers as valuable consumers. Over time, advertisements began showing Black families driving cars, using household products, wearing fashionable clothing and enjoying successful lives.

That change carried two meanings. It represented progress because Black people could finally see themselves inside the commercial image of American life. It also tied dignity to consumerism—the idea that success could be demonstrated through expensive clothing, cars, homes and products. Ebony helped Black people enter the visible consumer marketplace, but it also sometimes encouraged readers to measure advancement by what they could purchase.

Eunice Johnson expanded the company's influence through fashion. She created the Ebony Fashion Fair, a traveling fashion show that brought high-end European and American clothing to Black audiences around the country. Because some designers and businesses did not take Black models seriously, the Fashion Fair created its own platform. It presented dark skin, Black features and Black style as luxurious rather than something fashion needed to hide.

The difficulty of finding makeup suitable for darker skin led Johnson Publishing to create Fashion Fair Cosmetics. Black women were often forced to mix products because mainstream cosmetics companies offered few shades for them. Fashion Fair treated Black skin as the starting point of the business instead of an afterthought. This is where Ebony's influence moved beyond publishing: the magazine identified unmet needs and built businesses around them.

At its height, Johnson Publishing became the largest Black-owned publishing company in the world. Its Chicago headquarters at 820 South Michigan Avenue, completed in 1972, became a physical monument to that achievement. Designed by Black architect John Warren Moutoussamy, it was the first major downtown Chicago building designed by a Black architect. Black editors, photographers, artists, models and executives worked inside a building controlled by a Black company.

The building even contained the famous Ebony Test Kitchen, where recipes for the magazine were developed and tested. Food coverage mattered because Black cuisine was often dismissed, stereotyped or separated from serious discussions of American culture. Ebony recorded recipes, family traditions and changing tastes across Black America. The preserved kitchen later became part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. [Smithsonian](#)

Ebony's covers became cultural evidence. Being placed on the cover meant that someone had reached a major level of influence inside Black America. The magazine featured entertainers, athletes and politicians, but it also showed Black romance, fatherhood, education, business and beauty. A collection of Ebony covers forms a visual timeline of who Black America celebrated, debated and watched across generations.

Its massive photographic archive is even more important. Johnson Publishing accumulated millions of photographs documenting Black life for roughly three-quarters of a century. The collection includes civil-rights leaders, musicians, political figures, ordinary families, historic funerals, protests, churches, neighborhoods and private moments that larger archives might never have preserved. After Johnson Publishing entered bankruptcy, foundations purchased the archive for approximately \$30 million so it could be preserved and eventually made more accessible to the public.

Ebony's decline came from several directions. John Johnson died in 2005, and print media was already being weakened by the internet. Advertising money moved toward digital platforms. Readers stopped depending on monthly magazines for photographs,

celebrity news or political discussion because that material became immediately available online. The company also faced debt, management problems and the enormous cost of maintaining a print operation.

Johnson Publishing sold Ebony and Jet in 2016. The new ownership struggled, the print edition was suspended in 2019, employees and freelance writers fought over unpaid compensation, and the business entered bankruptcy. This part of the story cannot be cleaned up. One of Black America's strongest media institutions lost financial stability and control of the publications that had made it powerful.

Former NBA player and businessman Junior Bridgeman purchased Ebony and Jet out of bankruptcy for approximately \$14 million in 2020. Ebony relaunched digitally in 2021 under the Bridgeman family's ownership. Today, it operates mainly as a digital media brand covering culture, entertainment, beauty, social issues and business rather than as the thick monthly magazine generations once kept on their coffee tables. Ebony

The modern website can preserve the name, but the original magazine's power came from the world in which it existed. Before social media, a Black person could not simply create a page and show millions of people another side of Black life. Printing and nationally distributing photographs required expensive equipment, employees, advertisers, trucks, newsstands and relationships with retailers. Johnson built that entire system when the financial world did not believe a Black-centered publication could succeed.

Ebony was not perfect, and it never represented every Black political position, economic class or lifestyle. At times it could be overly polished, celebrity-heavy or too connected to corporate advertising. But it corrected an enormous imbalance. White-owned media had spent generations describing Black people from the outside. Ebony allowed Black writers, editors and photographers to turn the camera around and say: this is how we see ourselves.

Its deepest contribution was not placing famous Black faces on glossy covers. It created a visual memory for a people whose achievements were routinely erased. Ebony showed Black America experiencing love, ambition, grief, style, conflict, wealth, faith and ordinary life. It did not ask whether Black life was important enough to document. It built an empire from the truth that it already was.