

**White House/Black Reporter:** Alice Allison Dunnigan (1906–1983) in 1948 became the first black woman news correspondent to receive White House credentials. As a member of the Senate and House of Representatives press galleries, she covered presidential press conferences, reported on Congress, the State Department, the Supreme Court and received news generally kept from most reporters, the public, especially women and African Americans.

Ms. Dunnigan was the first black woman journalist to travel with a president when she accompanied Harry S. Truman's 1948 whistle-stop tour, for which she paid her own way to cover it. That year, she was the first black woman elected to the Women's National Press Club. Her association with this organization allowed her to travel extensively in the United States, to Canada, Israel, South America, Africa, Mexico, and the Caribbean. She was honored by Haitian President François Duvalier for her articles on Haiti.

Amid her many credentials, she served as chief of the Washington bureau of the Associated Negro Press for fourteen years. Still, at formal White House functions, she often was mistaken for the wife of a visiting dignitary; no one could imagine a black woman attending such an event on her own repute. At the time, during the 1940s and 50s, white-male congressional legislators were legislating gender disparate and racially discriminating laws enacted during Reconstruction, and were bolstered by the Supreme Court 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* confirming "separate but equal" Jim Crow laws in education, labor, housing, incarceration, the GI Bill, and more. Blacks often were referred to as "niggers" and women often referred to, not at all.

White-male politicians routinely maneuvered to avoid Dunnigan's direct questions, which often, but not always, were on race, politics and civil rights. Dunnigan professionally endured these race and gender indignities directed at her and her direct questions. Many other not-so-subtle indignities befell her, as in 1953 when she was forced to sit with the servants so she could cover the funeral of Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft, elder son of President William Howard Taft, and once when she was barred from covering a speech by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in a whites-only theater during his administration (1953-61).

In his press conferences Eisenhower resorted at first not to call on her and later to ask for her written questions beforehand. No other member of the press corps was required to submit their questions prior a press conference. **Dunnigan refused.** When John F. Kennedy took office he welcomed Dunnigan's tough questions and answered them frankly.

Dunnigan left her seat in the press galleries in 1960 to take a position in Lyndon B. Johnson's campaign for the Democratic nomination. Kennedy won the nomination, chose Johnson as his running mate, and in 1961 named Dunnigan as his education consultant of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity where she served until 1965, the year after Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act originally proposed by Kennedy.

Between 1966 and 1967 she worked as an information specialist for the Department of Labor, and from 1967 to 1970 she was as an associate editor with President Johnson's Commission on Youth Opportunity.

In 1968, when Richard M. Nixon took over the presidency, Dunnigan and the rest of the Democratic administration left the White House. She returned to writing; this time about herself. Her autobiography, *A Black Woman's Experience: From Schoolhouse to White House*, was published in 1974.

Alice was born in Russellville, Kentucky, to her father Willie, a tobacco sharecropper, and her mother Lena Pitman Allison, who worked as a washerwoman taking in laundry of white women. At age four, Alice learned to read before entering first grade by attending school one day a week. At age thirteen, after the ten years of schooling allowed to blacks in the segregated Russellville school system, Alice began to write one-sentence news items for the local *Owensboro Enterprise* newspaper.

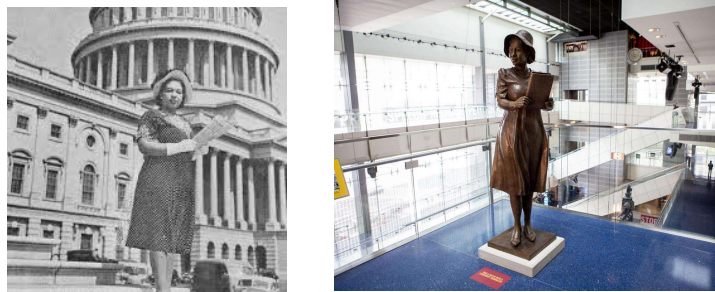
She had a dream to be a newspaper reporter as her life's work, but her parents did not reckon any advantage to allowing their daughter to continue her education. However, a Sunday school teacher who did interceded and Alice completed the teaching course at Kentucky Normal and Industrial Institute, now Kentucky State University.

As a young teacher in the segregated Todd County School system, teaching courses in Kentucky history, she noticed her students were not receiving lessons of the historic contributions black Americans had made to the state. Thus, she prepared an appendix for her students of such black historic facts to supplement the textbook provided. Her "Kentucky Fact Sheets" were collected for publication in 1939, but no publisher would take them to press. [In 1982, the Associated Publishers Inc. published her articles as *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians: Their Heritage and Tradition*.]

The meager teacher pay she earned in Kentucky public schools for eighteen years from 1924 to 1942 forced her to work numerous menial jobs during the summers. She worked four hours a day in a dairy, cleaned house for a family, did washing at night for another family, and washed tombstones in the white cemetery, all netting her a total of about seven dollars a week.

Answering a call for government workers in 1942 during World War II, Dunnigan moved to Washington, D.C., seeking better pay and employment. She worked as a typist for the federal government for four years while taking night courses at Howard University. In 1946 she was offered a job writing for *The Chicago Defender* as a Washington correspondent. The *Defender* was a black-owned weekly that did not use the words "Negro" or "black" in its pages. Instead, black people were referred to as "the Race" and black men and women as "Race men and Race women." The *Defender* paid her much less than her male counterparts until she could prove her worth. From 1947-61, she supplemented her income with other writing jobs. Her articles were printed in 112 black newspapers across the country, providing black history education to black communities nationwide.

In recognition of her innumerable accomplishments and the doors she opened for black women, and for white women who also were meagerly represented in America's free press corps, Dunnigan received more than 50 journalism awards and was posthumously inducted into the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame in 2013.



Now, she will be honored at the Newseum, a Washington, D.C., museum dedicated to the press and the First Amendment, with a six-foot bronze statue created by the artist Amanda Matthews of Lexington, Kentucky. It is based on a 1947 photograph of Ms. Dunnigan on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, holding a copy of *The Washington Post*.

Carrie Christoffersen, curator and vice president of exhibits at the Newseum said, "Alice was such a barrier breaker for women and people of color, we were happy to have the opportunity to embrace her here at the museum."

The statue will be on view at the museum from September 21 through December 16, 2018. It then will be taken to Ms. Dunnigan's hometown Russellville, Kentucky, and installed on the grounds of the West Kentucky African-American Heritage Center.

Sources: \*<https://www.nabj.org/page/HallOfFame>

\*<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/allison-dunnigan-alice-1906-1983>

\*<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/us/alice-allison-dunnigan-newseum-statue.html>

\*[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice\\_Allison\\_Dunnigan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Allison_Dunnigan)

\*Kathleen J. Frydl, *The GI Bill*.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTES:

In 1954, reporter Ethyl Payne unsettled Eisenhower by asking a question concerning segregation. Read my CountHerhistory column about her: "First Lady of the Black Press," Feb/2012, also Chapter 7 in my book *Thesaurus of Women from Water to Music*. A video narrated by James Morris, author of *Eye on the Struggle: Ethyl Payne First Lady of the Black Press*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kN2Rf1c3KOW>

In 2017, April Ryan, White House correspondent and bureau chief for American Urban Radio Networks asked if the new president planned to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus. The response gave her notoriety. Ryan's questions often but not always, concern minorities, ponders that other journalists do not ask such questions. "Why can't the dynamic of *all* people be in that room? ... but I have no qualms with it. ... I am the black reporter who also asks other issues and questions on China, Russia, Syria, North Korea. So if you want to label me a black reporter, I take it with a badge of honor."