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Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Three African-American Cryptologic Pioneers

(U) From 1939 to 1956 African-Americans employed by NSA and its predecessors were segregated into primarily support elements, a reflection of U.S. Army policies and the social tenor of the period. Even though President Truman issued two executive orders in 1948 setting out a policy of nondiscrimination in both the armed services and the federal government, several areas, such as the Russian plaintext traffic processing unit, remained all black into the 1950s. In addition, African-Americans for the most part held lower grade jobs in the machine division of that unit and others.

(U) There were occasional exceptions to this state of affairs. In 1948 the Research and Development organization at Arlington Hall Station hired the agency's first black engineer, Carroll Robinson. Mr. Robinson was involved in the design and development of the agency's first in-house-developed digital computer, Abner I.

(U) Two other African-Americans were hired by the Research and Development organization. Mitchell Brown and Charles Matthews were graduates of Hilltop Radio-Electronics Institute, a black-owned school in Washington, DC. They were brought on as engineering technicians and worked alongside their white counterparts.

(U) Apparently the environment for African-Americans in the R&D organization was relatively positive and conducive to professional growth. Carroll Robinson became NSA's first African-American senior executive, eventually reaching the position of office chief. Brown and Matthews also gained positions of significant responsibility: Mr. Brown eventually became test director of the Digital Voice Processor Consortium Test program, which led to the selection of equipment for the secure telephone unit (STU) II. Mr. Matthews served as a project engineer on Abner I and later on Solo, the Agency's first transistorized computer. He also held several supervisory and middle-management positions before he retired in 1988.

(U) All this is not to say the R&D organization was without its racial problems. Mitchell Brown pointed out in an interview that white engineering technicians with less experience or fewer qualifications were hired at higher grades. Moreover, Carroll Robinson noted that for many years African-Americans were not sent on overseas assignments because of the view that they would not be welcome in the host country.

(U) Nevertheless, the R&D organization in the late 1940s was a bright spot in the employment of African-Americans in the cryptologic business.

(U) (For the full story of the African-American experience in American cryptology, read The Invisible Cryptologists, WWII to 1956.)

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