

# Black Spartans (1907-1948)

#### Curators

Carli V. Lowe, University Archivist Kate Steffens, Special Collections Librarian

#### **Artist**

Yeab Kebede ('22, Digital Media Arts)

Graphic Designer
En Yu Ma ('22, Graphic Design)

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## **Exhibit Curators Statement**

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" represents ongoing research in SJSU Special Collections & Archives identifying documentation of Black experiences throughout SJSU history. This exhibit is the first of several installments.

Much of the information we have comes from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and the La Torre yearbooks. With too few exceptions, Black Spartans' stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. This is reflected in the language and focus of the articles. We invite you to read critically.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio. Locally, "the deed to virtually every home in San Jose" included restrictions against Black and Asian residents known as "restrictive covenants" (Spartan Daily, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events.

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" is an invitation to the community to join us in surfacing these stories, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students' lives. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

Carli V. Lowe - University Archivist Kate Steffens - Special Collections Librarian

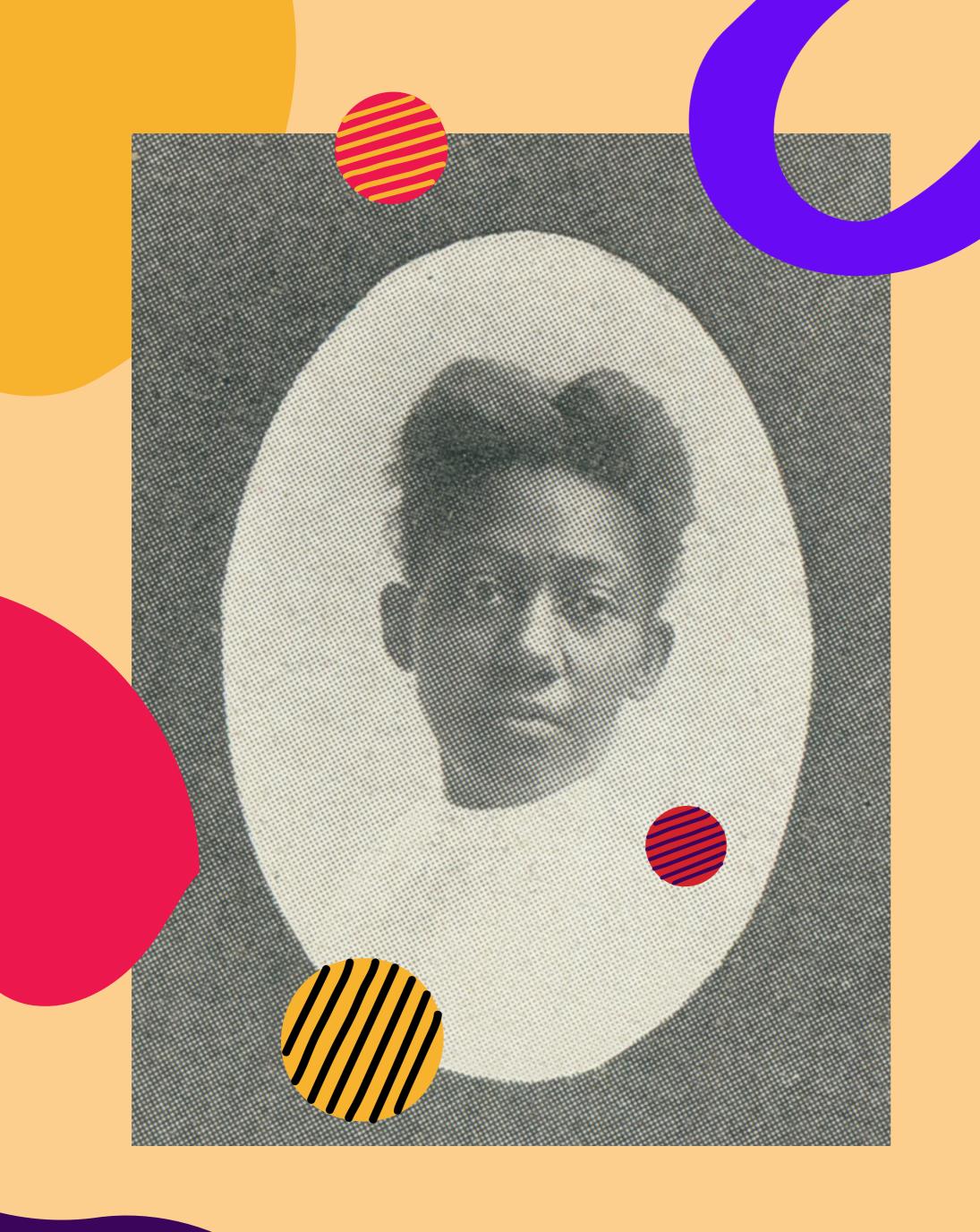
### **Artist Statement**

The "Black Spartans (1907-1948)" exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San José State University and the Bay Area at large. Until recently, the significance of Black bodies in Bay Area history (as well as U.S. history) was overlooked. Unless it was associated with the struggles of civil rights leaders, athletes, or celebrity-personas, the story of a graduate from a state school wasn't valued because we weren't part of the mainstream culture. As a Black Spartan myself, I was deeply connected to these individuals that started out just like me. I saw a reflection of myself and my community throughout the process of making these mixed media portraits and came to realize how important it is to know your history because it becomes a catalyst for knowing who you are.

My work explores the intricacy of identity and the role culture, tradition, and history play. These portraits are embodiments of our Black Spartans, they are visual representations of the colorful and captivating lives they led. Through this work, I hope to influence other artists and individuals to take part in researching and finding out the infinite layers of what it means to be Black. Our history is beyond our struggle. We are the blueprint.

Yeab Kebede '22 Digital Media Arts





Lucy Turner (Johnson) was the first Black woman to attend and graduate from SJSU, 1905-1907, when it was known as the California State Normal School. Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Johnson and her parents moved to Julian St. in San José in 1898. After graduating from the Teacher's College, Johnson married and she and her husband Charles moved to Berkeley. She volunteered with the Red Cross, was the Chairman of Forestry for the California State Federation of Colored Women, and was active in Republican politics and at her church, Antioch Baptist. In addition, Johnson worked as a polling station inspector, and ran a volunteer group for GOP Aids in their new Berkeley Headquarters in 1957. She passed away on February 16, 1969.



# **Normal Pennant**

June 1907

Lucy Turner Johnson is pictured with the graduates in her class.

### RECORD CLASS LEAVES NORMAL

C RADUATES Number 118, More Than Any Previous Graduation—Dr. Charles R. Brown, of Berkeley, Makes Address—Gift From Senior Class to School.

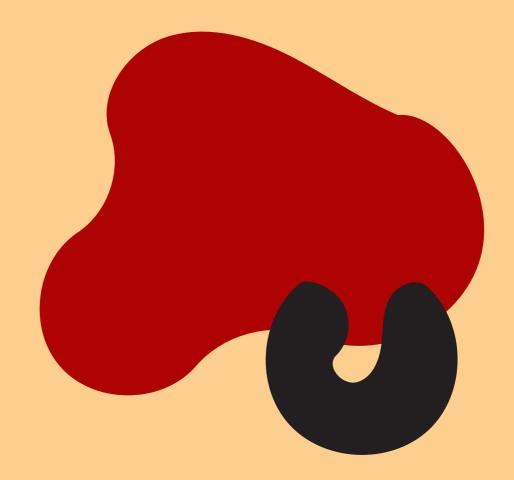


Graduates Get Diplomas.



Stewart, Alice E. Stockton. Hilma M. Swanbom, Vernie K. Swending, Roy Burton Thompson, Elaine Thompson, Ethel May Tucker. Lucy M. Turner, Daisie Estella Travis, Leah A. Vile, Adelma A. Walters, Carlotta Janey Wallian, Cella Blanche Watrous, Cecil Margaret Watkins, Marion Whitmire, Alice O. Whittemore, Ava E. Wilkin, Elizabeth Maurice Woodhams, Ellen Young.

Miss Lucy Turner, one of the class of '07, is the first colored girl to graduate from the Normal. She has coverd her course with credit, and the authorities have given her a strong recommendation as a teacher. She was formerly a student of the San Jose High School,

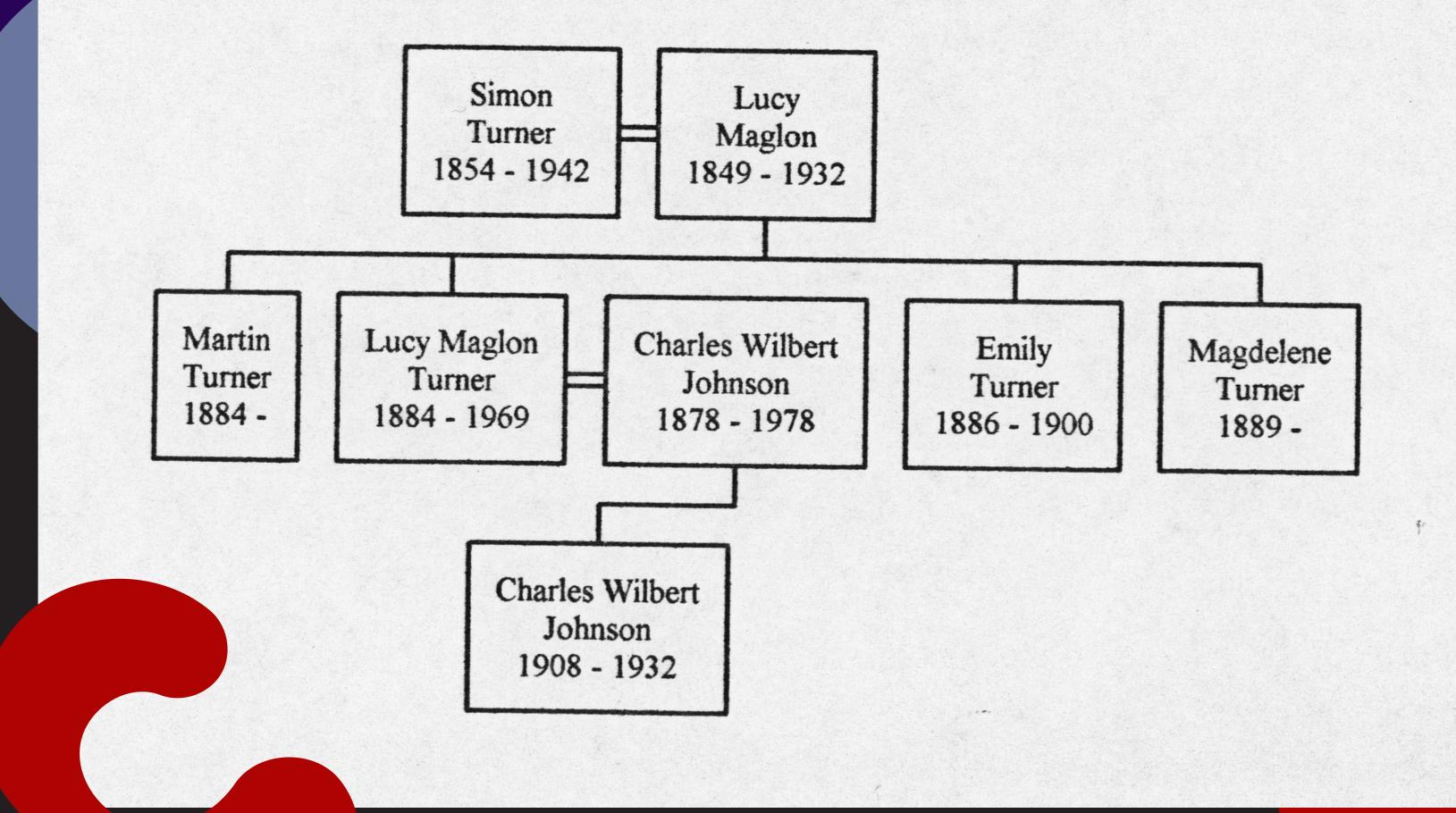


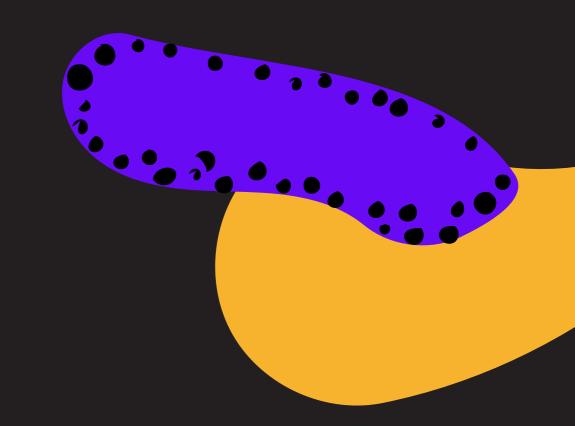
## San Jose Mercury News

June 22, 1907

In a year when a record number of students graduate from the San Jose State Normal School, Lucy Turner is noted as the first of the school's Black students.

# Descendants of Simon Turner





Turner Family Tree
Compiled by the Sourisseau Academy

