Distinguished African Americans in AT&T History

Compiled by Dr. Sheldon Hochheiser, AT&T Corporate Historian

Joseph S. Colson, Jr.

An electrical engineer, he joined Bell Telephone Laboratories as a researcher in 1968. From 1971 until 1987, he held a variety of technical management positions involving computer-aided testing, common channel signaling, packet switching, cellular telephony, and international switching. In 1987, he became the first African American executive director in a technical position at the Labs, as head of the switching systems performance division. In 1992, he left the Labs to become vice president of AT&T Switching Systems, U.S. division, and in 1995 the president of AT&T Affiliates Sales. He retired from AT&T spinoff Lucent Technologies in 1998.

Marian Graddick-Weir

She began her career at Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1981 in human factors research, and later held a wide range of positions in human resources, including identifying high-potential candidates, succession planning and international human relations. She was executive vice president of human resources and a member of the senior leadership team at AT&T Corp., 1999-2004, and then executive vice president of human resources and employee communications until her departure in 2006.

W. Lincoln Hawkins

The first African American scientist at Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1942, he had a long and distinguished career as a chemist. His most important innovation was as co-inventor of an additive to stabilize the plastic protective covering of telephone cables, a process that has saved billions of dollars for telecom companies around the world. In addition to 14 U.S. and 129 foreign patents, Hawkins was the first African American to be inducted into the National Academy of Engineering and received the 1992 National Medal of Technology. Hawkins long served as a mentor to young minority researchers. He retired in 1976.

Jerome B. Holland

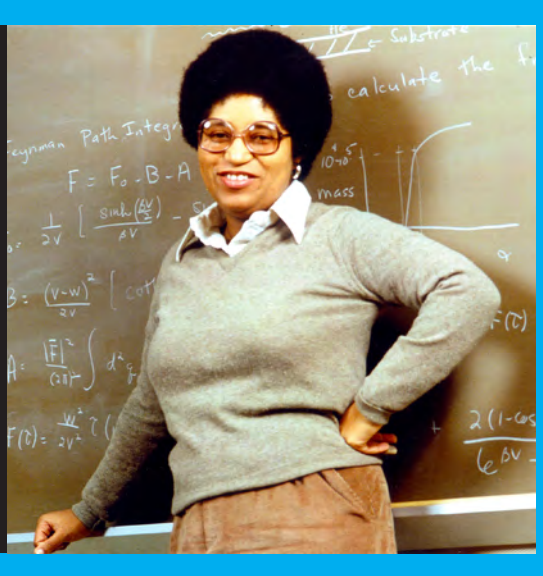
Holland was the first African American elected to the AT&T Board of Directors, in 1972. He was the former U.S. Ambassador to Sweden and prior to that president of Delaware State College (now Delaware State University) and then the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). Elected to the Board's executive committee in 1973, he served on the Board through 1984.

Robert L. Hurst

Hurst joined Michigan Bell Telephone Company as a sales manager in 1969, where he went on to hold various management positions. In 1987, he was named vice-president of finance and administration for Ameritech Services in Schaumburg, Illinois. He returned to Michigan Bell one year later as vice president of personnel and support services. Hurst was appointed vice president of marketing and business development in January 1990 and vice president of sales and service in January 1992. Six months later, he was named president of Michigan Bell, and in 1993 became president of Ameritech Network Services, the parent company's largest business unit. Hurst died of a heart attack at the age of 51 in 1994.

Shirley M. Jackson

The first African American female Ph.D. physicist at Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1976, she did ground-breaking work in several areas of theoretical physics, including the properties of semiconductor strained layer superlattices. After leaving the Labs in 1991, she gained renown as the long-time president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a position she continues to hold in 2020.



Roger L. Plummer

Plummer joined Illinois Bell Telephone Company as a management trainee in 1964. He held a series of increasingly important positions in engineering and management before becoming vice president for residential services in 1981. In 1985, he became Illinois Bell's vice president-operations and a member of its Board of Directors. In 1987, he moved to parent company Ameritech as president of Ameritech Information Services, where he integrated the medium and large business customer sales and service operations of Ameritech's five Bell operating companies. He held this position until 1993, when he briefly served as president of Ameritech Custom Business Services before leaving the company.

Ramon "Ray" Scruggs

The first African American management employee of Michigan Bell in 1939, he was hired as a commercial agent to serve the Black community. In 1940, he became manager of the new Gratiot Public Office, which was established to serve minority customers in that section of Detroit. In 1963, he transferred to AT&T as a public relations manager. His final position was the assistant vice president level as AT&T's director of minority affairs. He retired in 1974.

Earl Shaw

Shaw joined Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1969 as a physicist. He did ground-breaking work on non-linear optics and tunable lasers, including inventing the far-infrared free electron laser, which he took with him when he moved to Rutgers University, Newark in 1991.

Charles H. "Chuck" Smith

Smith joined The Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company in 1967, and over the years held increasingly responsible positions in HR, operations and marketing. He became an officer in 1990 as vice president and general manager of Pacific Bell's Sacramento-North business unit; VP-GM of Los Angeles in 1993; and VP-network operations two years later. After SBC's acquisition of Pacific Bell in 1997, he was named president-network operations. In 2002, Smith was promoted to president of SBC West (renamed AT&T West in 2005) where he was responsible for all operational issues in California and Nevada, until his retirement in 2006.

James "Jim" West

West joined Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1957. He holds over 250 U.S. and foreign patents. The most important of these patents is as co-inventor (1962) of the foil electret microphone. Over 90% of microphones in use today are based on this invention. He has numerous contributions to acoustical science and also helped create the Corporate Research Fellowship Program for minority and female college students. West was also awarded the Bell Labs Fellow Award and the 2006 National Medal of Technology. He retired from AT&T spinoff Lucent Bell Laboratories in 2001.

Horace Wilkins, Jr.

Wilkins joined Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in Texas in 1972 in a management development program. Over the following years, he held a series of increasingly responsible positions. In 1986, he became vice president-network distribution services in Houston, and in 1989, vice president-government and industry affairs for the parent company, responsible for representing SBC and its subsidiaries in regulatory and legislative matters before Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, and other federal agencies. He was named president of SBC Missouri in 1992, and then several other positions at the presidential level. His final assignment in 1998 was president-special markets at SBC Communications. Wilkins retired in 2000.

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