

Centennial Celebration: What Can I Do to Mark the 100th Anniversary of the First Black CPA?

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Please Note: The views and interpretations reflected below are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect an expression of opinion on the part of The Georgia Society of CPAs.

In 1921, John W Cromwell Jr. became the first licensed Black CPA. When GSCPA asked me to contribute to the industry's centennial celebration of this amazing 100th anniversary, I was honored to accept! As I reflect on the anniversary and my career, feelings of pride are tempered because it's also a reminder of how far we still have to go.

Of the approximately 650,000 CPAs, less than one percent are Black.

I love my profession and value how much we help our clients. I have had and am continuing to have a great career and much success. Considering I'm a young Black woman in a profession where I'm often the only person of color in the room, successes should be celebrated. Can I still say young if I've been doing this for 30 years? Absolutely! Per the *CPA Journal*, CPAs over 50 make up 71 percent of sole practitioners and smaller firms.

To honor those who came before me, I must acknowledge two things; 1) I haven't directly experienced intentional roadblocks because of my race or gender, and 2) the hindrances in my remaining or advancing in the profession isn't predicated on intent. Those pioneers in our profession, John W Cromwell, Jr., Mary T Washington Wylie (first Black woman CPA), Dr. Quiester Craig (former Dean of the School of Business and Economics at NCA&T State University, and instrumental in hundreds of black students getting their CPA), faced direct barriers to obtaining their CPA. My challenge is being out of the industry's comfort zone. This lack of mutual experiences often clouds the ability for Black people to continue to advance as CPAs. The value my perspective brings when understanding how finances impact our clients isn't always respected or acknowledged.

The clients we serve are not a homogeneous group, and I've found the significant successes I've had with clients revolve around knowing how their situation differs from conventional financial rules. For example, common advice is to wait to get social security to maximize the benefit. But for a significant portion of the population, this isn't sound advice. Workers who never reach the social security income limit are also not likely to live significantly past social security's ever-increasing retirement age. While highly valued by clients, this

different viewpoint doesn't align with the traditional financial education CPAs get and therefore further alienates diverse CPAs from advancement opportunities. The uphill battle to explain and validate this 'contradictory' advice has impacted co-worker's perception of me and probably hindered my advancement at firms.

The CPA partnership model requires knowing, understanding and feeling familiar with fellow partners, and this will always be an area where we can't excel.

Reading about the hurdles John Cromwell faced, I realize things could be worse. But I guess I'm just of the wrong generation. I'm frustrated things aren't better after 100 years.

The first Black CPAs were truly extraordinary. They had to create their paths by kicking in a door, finding a side entrance, or saying forget it and creating their own. Still, a person should not have to be extraordinary to be a successful CPA. I passed the CPA exam solely to satisfy my mother, who equated getting an accounting degree without getting a CPA to graduating from law school and not passing the bar. Mentorship programs that promote diversity are certainly helpful, but advocates would be better.

Fortunately, one of my mentors, Dr. Quiester Craig, emphasized finding a way to be successful by being yourself. I am a Black woman who had a normal middle-class life, and my circle of working professionals and families that need CPAs is dramatically different from my co-workers.

There is an entire population of people we aren't letting rise to their highest and best use. And an entire population of clients who aren't getting served. The fact patterns, financial needs and advice requirements are equally valid, something my predecessors knew well. The CPA industry could be even more remarkable by expanding our footprint and embracing all these different perspectives.

So I ask the GSCPA membership, what we can do differently and better, so our industry is reflective of our clients? In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the first Black CPA, ask yourself, have you advocated for someone you work with and respect but may not fully understand?



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