UNIVERSAL AFRICAN BLACK CROSS NURSES · FOUNDED 1920

THE BLACK CROSS NURSES

The UNIA's women's auxiliary, modeled on the Red Cross: health education, first aid, care for mothers and babies, food and clothing for people in need. They marched in the parades in white, and they did the daily work of community health in Harlem, Belize, Cuba, Canada and beyond.



Harlem, 1 August 1922: "Black Cross Nurses in the giant parade through Harlem which today opened the thirty-day annual world convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association." Press photograph, original agency unconfirmed; marked public domain on Wikimedia Commons.

1 The banner: a cross and the words "Black Cross Nurses, U.N.I.A." Read it off the photo.

2 The U.S. flag at the front. Why march a Pan-African parade behind it?

3 Dress uniform: all white, from cap to shoes and stockings.

4 The street: storefronts, onlookers on the curb. Who is watching?



DRESS UNIFORM

All white: dress, shoes, stockings, and a cap bearing a black cross set in a red circle with a green center. Worn for parades and official functions.



DUTY UNIFORM

A green dress under an ivory apron, with black shoes and stockings. Green stood for growth and renewal. In Session 4, Dr. Humphrey walked through the same two looks: one for work, one for the parade.

UNIFORM DESCRIPTIONS, PURPOSE AND FOUNDING: WIKIPEDIA, "BLACK CROSS NURSES" (CITING UNIA-ACL AUXILIARY RECORDS); CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HEALTH CARE, "BLACK CROSS NURSES" (2026). DRAWINGS ARE DIAGRAMS OF THE WRITTEN DESCRIPTIONS, NOT COPIES OF A PHOTOGRAPH. BLACK STAR ARCHIVE × RADICAL IMAGINATION.

HEALTH CARE AS NATION-BUILDING

WHAT THEY DID, WHO JOINED, AND HOW FAR IT SPREAD

THE WORK

- Health and hygiene education; nutrition training.
- Care for mothers and infants; teaching new mothers to care for their children.
- First aid and care for the sick.
- Food and clothing for people in need.
- Fliers on health and public safety; columns in the Negro World on topics from expectant mothers to contagious disease.
- Disaster relief: after the 1931 Belize hurricane, nurses served in the public hospital and relief camps.

WHO COULD JOIN

- Active UNIA members between 15 and 45, of African descent.
- Able to read and write.
- Courses of six months to a year; graduates bought and wore the official uniform.
- Each local chapter had a matron, head nurse, secretary and treasurer.

TWO AUXILIARIES, ONE MOVEMENT

The men's Universal African Legion marched in military dress; the nurses in white. Some critics compared the nurses' dress and cape to a nun's habit. What does each uniform say about what men and women were expected to do?

WHERE THEY SERVED

PHILADELPHIA	First chapter, 1920.
UNITED STATES	Within a few years: Alabama, California, Chicago, Georgia, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York and Virginia. Harlem was the largest branch.
BELIZE	Founded 1920 by Vivian Seay, who led it until 1971. By 1923, 24 certified nurses. Revived in the 1980s; still serving.
JAMAICA	Organized 1922; Sarah Grant trained 29 nurses.
CUBA	Chapters in United Fruit company towns such as Banes; active until 1932.
CANADA	Montreal, Toronto, Sydney (Nova Scotia), Edmonton. Toronto's nurses made bandages for Ethiopia during the Italian invasion.
ALSO	Panama, Trinidad and Tobago.

Where the sources disagree

- **Founder:** most accounts credit Henrietta Vinton Davis. The Canadian Museum of Health Care names Isabella Lawrence of Belize, a registered nurse, as international president, with Davis forming chapters.
- **Training:** six-month to one-year courses, or "no professional training"? Sources split.
- **The date:** one source gives 6 May 1920; others say only May, or 1920.

The UNIA built its own health corps. What does that say about who it trusted to care for its people?

Why march nurses in a parade at all?

Belize's chapter is still serving. What would a Black Cross Nurses chapter do in your neighborhood today?

SOURCES: WIKIPEDIA, "BLACK CROSS NURSES" (CHAPTERS, MEMBERSHIP RULES, TRAINING, BELIZE, JAMAICA, CUBA, UNIFORMS); CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HEALTH CARE, "BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2026: BLACK CROSS NURSES" (CANADA, ISABELLA LAWRENCE, FLIERS); AFRICAN AMERICAN REGISTRY, "THE BLACK CROSS NURSES ASSOCIATION IS FORMED" (6 MAY 1920). FULLER RESEARCH: HILL, ED., GARVEY PAPERS; NEGRO WORLD. BLACK STAR ARCHIVE × RADICAL IMAGINATION.