Since 1976, every U.S. President has recognized the month of February as Black History Month. In celebration, DLBA would like to shed light on the work of two courageous African-American business pioneers in Long Beach at the start of the 20th century, and to recognize a current Downtown business owner who has a keen appreciation of black history.

An early advocate for the success of black-owned businesses in Long Beach was George Washington Hawkins. Born in Alabama in 1845, Hawkins moved to Los Angeles in 1891 and opened a furniture shop on Second Street in Downtown L.A. He was instrumental in forming the Colored Business Men’s League of Los Angeles, which met at his shop. The League’s stated goal
was to “instill into the race a desire to branch out in various commercial lines and to be better known among their people that they might obtain a good share of the trade that now drifts to other firms.”

The League was very vocal in its condemnations of the lingering discrimination and violence against African-Americans.

Hawkins, who advised African-Americans to purchase and develop their own land, followed his own advice and bought property in the Los Cerritos area of Long Beach. He established a ranch there while commuting via the Pacific Electric Railway to his L.A. shop and continuing to be a fierce proponent of civil rights and African-American commerce.

Ernest McBride Sr. was another key figure in the development of Long Beach black-owned businesses. It is poetic justice that McBride, born in Mississippi at a time when there were no schools there for African-Americans, now has a high school named after him in Long Beach.

McBride arrived in Long Beach in 1930 and got a job loading cotton onto ships in San Pedro Harbor. When he discovered injustices with his crew’s pay rate, he quit the job and began his fight to unionize all shipyard workers, regardless of race.

McBride met resistance when he tried to purchase a home in Long Beach in 1948, but he persevered, raising six children in his home on Lemon Avenue, which became a regular meeting place for civil rights activists.

After co-founding the Long Beach chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), McBride established himself as a local legend by successfully fighting to integrate the Long Beach Police and Fire Departments, the Naval Shipyard and General Telephone Company.
McBride and Hawkins paved the way for successful Long Beach business owners such as Max Viltz, whose world imports shop Village Treasures has been a Downtown fixture for almost 20 years (you may have noticed the stunning African masks and sculptures through the picture windows of her previous location in the East Village, or the life-size Zebra statue that beckons people into her current Broadway Avenue location).

Viltz was inspired to open an import shop on Atlantic Avenue in 1997 after a trip to Egypt in the ’90s guided by Cornell University Egyptologist Dr. Yosef Ben Jochannan. Jochannan encouraged his pupils to educate their communities about African culture. Inspired, Viltz opened her shop and filled it with artifacts and artwork from Africa while continuing to work a corporate job.

Viltz, a Downtown resident, decided to commit full-time to her own business, getting a financial start-up loan and connections to City business protocols from DLBA. She became active in the Long Beach culture community, serving on the board of the Arts Council of Long Beach for nine years.

Village Treasures is filled with African artwork: ebony sculptures from Tanzania, textiles from The Congo, and various artifacts from Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria. Viltz has visited all of those countries. She is passionate and knowledgeable about the history of black-owned businesses in Long Beach and of black culture in general.

Viltz serves as Co-Chair of Long Beach African American Culture Center Project, which called upon the input of community stakeholders throughout 2019 in a series of meetings and workshops to help shape its vision.

The mission statement of the LBAACC is “to celebrate, cultivate, and advance the enrichment of the heritage and culture of the Black/African American community in Long Beach
and beyond.”

We encourage you to learn more about the LBAACC (please visit link below) and to explore the great events happening during the month of February in celebration of Black History Month including:

African American Festival at the Aquarium of the Pacific
Motherland: Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow – A Black History Month Event
Remembering Our Roots
LBCC Black History Exhibit
African American Cultural Center Community Visioning Process