

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Carter G. Woodson: Father of Black History



"Truth comes to us from the past."

— Dr. Carter G. Woodson

BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES

For Carter G. Woodson, Ph.D., the past represented the treasures that had been hidden from African Americans and erased from history books. Known as the "Father of Black History," Woodson promoted the recognition of African-American history as a legitimate part of American history. Thanks to his efforts, the achievements and experiences of African Americans are acknowledged, researched and celebrated.

Carter Godwin Woodson was born on December 19, 1875 in New Canton, Va. His parents were former slaves who could neither read nor write and they struggled to support their nine children. As the eldest, Woodson worked in coal mines to help support his family. Although he didn't get the chance to attend high school until he was 20, he finished in a year and a half.

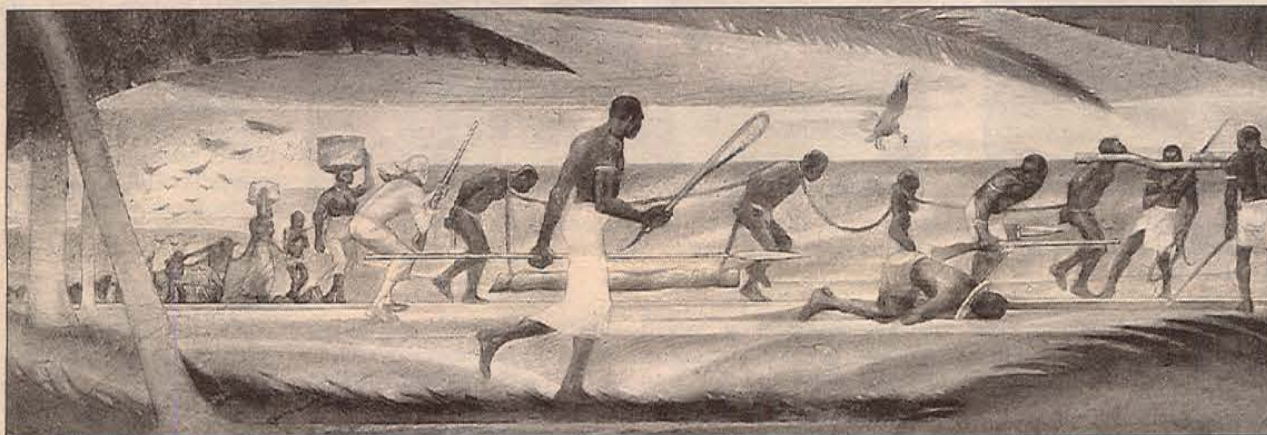
Woodson valued education and soon earned a bachelor's degree from Berea College in Kentucky and a master's degree

from the University of Chicago. He traveled through Asia, Africa and Europe, learning Spanish and French. He studied at Sorbonne University in Paris and was appointed a school supervisor in the Philippines. In 1912, Woodson became the second African American to earn a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University.

After his years of study, Woodson realized that African American contributions were ignored by the authors of history books. He decided to change this, founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Chicago in 1915. The organization published a scholarly journal, *The Journal of Negro History*, in 1916 and in 1926, he established Negro History Week.

Choosing the second week of February in honor of Frederick Douglass' and Abraham Lincoln's birthday, Woodson revealed the important role African Americans played in developing and enriching the country. Woodson published 18 books on African-American history before his death in 1950. Notable are *The Mis-Education of the Negro* and *The Negro In Our History*.

In 1976, Negro History Week evolved into Black History Month, bringing Woodson's dream that all Americans gain knowledge of Black history closer to reality.



THE EVOLUTION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Carter G. Woodson believed scientific fact would finally prove to the world the importance of African-American accomplishments. So, *The Journal of Negro History* presented scholarly research about ancient African contributions to civilization as well as modern achievements.

Woodson thought that the truth would wipe out racial prejudice and false beliefs. But white scholars still did not give any attention to the association's research and neither did the general public. He realized he had to reach everybody, not just scholars.

The association announced the first Negro History Week in 1926. They decided to re-educate black and white people about African-American history. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) was open to anybody interested in history, not just historians and scholars. The study of black history suddenly became popular, with

black history clubs starting up and teachers demanding materials to instruct students on the topic.

Over the years, Negro History Week has become a significant part of American culture. During the 1960s, when African Americans became more aware of their heritage, they demanded black studies college courses, as well as more than a week to celebrate black history.

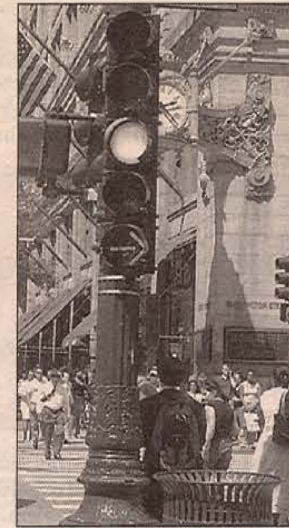
In 1976, ASNLH held the first Black History Month. It has been honored ever since, with every president issuing a Black History Month proclamation. Now called the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, the association provides an African-American History Month theme every year. For 2007, the theme is "From Slavery To Freedom, Africans in the Americas."

Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

Source: Association for the Study of African American Life and History

The importance of African-American history

When Dr. Carter G. Woodson started Negro history week in 1926, few Americans knew anything about the history of African Americans. Popular myths insisted that Africa and her sons and daughters were uncivilized until Europeans came along to rescue them. The only mention of African-American experiences in history books related to slavery. Woodson wanted the truth about the intelligence, fortitude and power of black people to be recognized. He wanted the many contributions that African Americans have made to American society, culture and economy to be celebrated the same way that white achievements are.



Now, every February, the achievements of African Americans become prominent. People learn about the lives of famous African Americans.

The inventions that African Americans have created, from the traffic light, to rock music, are acknowledged. Because of such visible progress, some people question whether it is really necessary to continue to celebrate African American history month. The truth is African American History Month will remain important as long as there is inequality. History books still only dedicate a page or two to over 200 years of African-American history. African-American images are often stereotyped or overlooked. Many people would never learn anything about African-American history if there were not special programs and museum exhibits to catch their attention every February. African-American history is American history and should be celebrated 365 days a year. Until that time comes, American American History Month will always be important.

Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY CHALLENGE

1. Who founded Chicago?
2. Carter G. Woodson was the second African American to earn a doctorate degree from Harvard: Who was the first?
3. Who invented the popular water toy, the Super Soaker?
4. *Clotel* was the first novel

written by an African American: Who wrote it and when?

5. After years of demonstrations and legislative petitions, when did Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday finally become a U.S. national holiday?

- Answers:
1. Haiti born trader and businessman Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable built the area's first home on the north bank of the Chicago River in 1779.
 2. W.E.B. DuBois in 1895.
 3. African-American aerospace engineer Lonnie Johnson did in 1988.
 4. William Wells Brown in 1853
 5. 1986

DID YOU KNOW?

The Historymakers, the largest archival project of its kind, collects the videotaped oral history of significant African Americans and is headquartered in Chicago's South Loop neighborhood?

Source: Historymakers.com