

The origin of Black History Month

Written by Mahmoud El-Kati
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So often we find ourselves involved in activities without fully understanding why, as occasionally is the case during our annual observance of Black History Month. This celebration is our most meaningful opportunity to promote cultural awareness, provide direction for our young and take pride in our collective historical accomplishments.

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Since 1926, there have been various ways in which Black people set aside a time of year to honor our past, appreciate our present and work toward fulfillment of the future. This concept was introduced by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, one of our most revered historians and critical thinkers. Dr. Woodson was a man who not only studied and wrote history but made history as well. He was a brilliant scholar with a universal mind, and yet he chose to devote his life and genius to discovering the lost or missing pages of history and including the facts about achievement, challenges and heroism of Black people, and placing them where they rightfully belonged.

As a living public figure, Dr. Woodson's name was prominent from 1912 until 1950, the untimely year of his death. With a background of struggle that was required to obtain an education, Dr. Woodson climbed from the coal mines of Virginia and West Virginia and finished high school at age 22. By age 37 he had earned his PhD in history from Harvard University and went on to fulfill his passionate desire to be useful service to his people. After serving as Dean of Liberal Arts at Howard University and Dean of West Virginia Institute, Woodson stated that his dominant purpose was to turn his historical training and preparation to the best racial account

Woodson shared his learning and research skills by developing three enduring institutions, which are still with us today: The Association of the Study of Negro Life and History (now Afro-American Life and History), founded in 1915; The Journal of Negro History and the Negro History Bulletin both of which were founded in 1916. The latter two have been published quarterly for more than a half century and provided generation of Black Scholars with the opportunity to develop their skills and expose their work.

Woodson did not stop there -- in 1926 he founded Negro History Week, to observe between the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln in February. He inspired Black Americans to make a concrete expression of their heritage by holding celebration in their churches, schools and community centers as well as lodges and civic clubs. He also traveled widely establishing Negro History Study Clubs and encouraging small groups of people to spend Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons in their homes learning about the history of American that had been left out of the one-sided, white oriented school textbooks.

Today, we celebrate Black History Month and one can well imagine that Dr. Woodson would be pleased to know that the tradition he introduced has been so proudly expanded by his people. Today, the ultimate intent of Black History Month is not only to help African Americans understand, appreciate and preserve our great heritage, but also to speak to the members of the larger society who are looking for avenues of understanding themselves and their Black countrymen. By extension, Black History is a celebration of the existence of a key people, a people who came here before the Mayflower. Most of all, Black History Month is a time of learning and reflection-a time to look at one another, instead of up or down to one another.

Thank you Dr. Carter G. Woodson. We love the memory of you and will continue to cherish and maintain this great idea. Sleep well our father; your children honor you still.