

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: ORIGIN, MEANING, & EVOLUTION

A Fact Sheet on the Purpose, History, and Significance of the Annual Observance

THE VISIONARY FOUNDER

- Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a historian, author, and journalist, is known as the "Father of Black History".
- He established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915.
- Woodson believed that the contributions of Black Americans were overlooked and suppressed in history books. His goal was to promote the scientific study and preservation of Black history.
- He launched the movement to counter racist narratives and foster racial pride.

WHY FEBRUARY?

- Woodson selected the second week of February for Negro History Week.
- This coincided with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (Feb 12) and Frederick Douglass (Feb 14).
- Both men were already celebrated figures within Black communities since the late 19th century.
- Woodson built upon existing traditions to ensure broader adoption.
- There was no sinister reason for choosing the shortest month.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

- President Gerald Ford officially recognized Black History Month in 1976.
- He urged Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans".
- Since then, every U.S. president has issued an annual proclamation endorsing the month.
- It is now celebrated in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

- Black History Month is not meant to confine Black history to a single month.
- It is an annual focal point to inspire year-round study and integration of Black history.
- It is not designed to create division but to foster understanding and unity through shared history.
- The month does not solely focus on slavery but also on resilience, contributions, and culture.

ORIGIN: NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

- Woodson initiated the first "Negro History Week" on February 7, 1926.
- It was designed to encourage the coordinated teaching of Black history in schools.
- The week was met with enthusiastic response from Black educators and communities nationwide.
- It provided study materials like pictures, lessons, and plays for historical performances.
- The primary focus was on the study of the Black race, not just individual achievements.

EVOLUTION TO A MONTH

- The celebration expanded beyond a week during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s.
- Black educators and students at Kent State University proposed the first Black History Month in February 1969.
- By the late 1960s, Black History Month was replacing Negro History Week across many college campuses.
- The ASNLH (now ASALH) institutionalized the shift to a month in 1976, the nation's bicentennial.

ANNUAL THEMES

- Since 1928, ASALH has dedicated an annual theme to the celebration.
- Themes help focus the public's attention on specific aspects of Black history and culture.
- Past themes include "The Crisis in Black Education" (2017) and "Black Health and Wellness" (2022).
- The 2024 theme is "African Americans and the Arts", and 2025's is "African Americans and Labor".
- Themes evolve to reflect contemporary issues and historical significance.

MODERN SIGNIFICANCE & PURPOSE

- The month remains vital for countering historical erasure and promoting inclusive education.
- It encourages reflection on both the struggles and achievements of Black Americans.
- It serves as a call to action for continued efforts toward equality and justice.
- Black History Month highlights that Black history is fundamentally American history.

Understanding the past is essential to building a more equitable future.