

## Why “Black History Month?”

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Black History Month calls for the remembrance of blacks and historical events in the United States, United Kingdom (October), Canada (February), the Middle East and other countries around the world. Black History Month is a month to strive for "Information Democracy" in which all people are equally informed about accomplishments of African Americans and the positive impact they had on America's success. Former President James Monroe understood the importance of Information Democracy. On the cold winter day of Dec. 2, 1823 in which he presented his State of the Union speech, President Monroe informed the American people: "To the people every department of the Government and every individual in each are responsible, and the more full their information the better they can judge of the wisdom of the policy pursued and of the conduct of each in regard to it." This article will, therefore, attempt to share information referencing the positive impact African Americans had on the New World—the United States of America.

Most people associate Black History Month with Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup>. In fact, the origins of Black History Month, formerly called Negro History Week, is a celebration pioneered by Dr. Carter G. Woodson. Dr. Woodson was known by many as Father of Black History and was the second African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University (the first was W. E. B. DuBois). Originally, Negro History Week was established as the second week of February, commemorating the birthdays of two noble Americans who greatly influenced the lives and social conditions of blacks: President Abraham Lincoln and former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In 1976, the week was extended to the full month of February and renamed “Black History Month.”

Black History Month salutes our African American ancestors who gave their lives fighting for equality, justice, liberty, domestic tranquility and freedom. In his inaugural address, in 1961, President John F. Kennedy stated, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Many African American ancestors did just that. They paid a serious price and endured many burdens in order to assure their survival and their success for liberty. Even when they did not succeed, their actions, thoughts and dreams were responsible for some of the most profound economic, political and cultural developments in the United States. Moreover, their labor engendered extraordinary wealth and gave birth to capitalism.

Several civil rights activists played a significant role in defining America's civilization. When asked the question, "What is the name of the first African American woman who was incarcerated for refusing to relinquish her bus seat to a white person?" Most would say Rosa Parks, when in fact Irene Morgan was the predecessor to Rosa Parks. In

1944, at the age of 27, Morgan was arrested and incarcerated in Virginia for refusing to give up her seat on a Greyhound bus. These women's heroic actions led to a landmark decision, when in 1946 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 7-1 that Virginia's state law enforcing segregation on interstate buses was illegal; a ruling that promulgated across the United States.

For most African Americans, the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented a unique historical odyssey. African Americans who defended this country played a momentous role in putting the United States on the road to economic success. The innovative thoughts of Garrett A. Morgan in 1912 led to the invention of the first automatic traffic light ("stop" and "go" signals). Morgan also invented the first "breathing device," which later became the gas mask. George Washington Carver, born into slavery in 1864, became an expert on agriculture and assisted poor African American farmers in improving their soil; thereby leading to the growth of healthier crops. By 1921, he had created more than 280 products from the peanut and 150 products from the sweet potato, including candy, instant coffee, paint and cereal. He received his college degree from Iowa State College and taught at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Although African Americans were often relegated to menial jobs in the healthcare field, they also played a significant role in this field. The first African American medical doctor in the United States was James Derham. Born as a slave in 1762, Derham was one of the country's leading doctors. Even though he was not allowed to get a college education, he worked as his master's assistant, learning how to mix medicines and treat patients. He gained great respect from other doctors and became well-known throughout the country as an expert on the ways climate affected diseases.

Unlike Derham, in 1883, Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler became the first African American woman in the United States to earn a medical degree and the only African American woman to graduate from the New England Female Medical College, which merged with Boston University in 1873. A distinguished author, Dr. Crumpler wrote several books relating to health care for women and children. Moreover, it was not until 1893 that the first open-heart surgery was conducted by Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, a distinguished African American surgeon. He later established Provident Hospital, the first non-segregated hospital in the United States. Dr. Williams' eagerness to help others can also be linked to the establishment of several training schools for African-American nurses, leading to life saving measures for many African Americans. His work paved the road for other black doctors, such as Benjamin Carson and Mae Jemison. In 1987, for example, Dr. Benjamin Carson, a neurosurgeon at John Hopkins University Hospital, became the first doctor to separate conjoined twins (joined at the head). Following Dr. Carson's footsteps, in 1992, Dr. Mae Jemison became the first African American woman astronaut to enter space on spacecraft Endeavor. She earned her medical degree from Cornell University Medical College in New York. As a doctor, she served for several years in the Peace Corps, providing medical care in the African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Black History Month is also a time for remembering our African American war heroes. The work of Mary Elizabeth Bowser should not go unnoticed. Working in concert with Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Benjamin Butler, Mary Elizabeth Bowser's heroic actions played a major role during the Civil War era. While serving as a servant for President Jefferson Davis and his military leaders, Bowser intercepted and read top-secret war dispatches and overheard conversations about Confederate troop strategy and movement. Her photographic mind allowed her to memorize these details word for word, which were passed to Union spies, who then decoded the information. Her efforts aided the Union Army in its defeat of the Confederate Army. Bowser was decorated as one of the highest-placed and most productive African American espionage agents of the Civil War. Meanwhile, serving as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman helped more than 300 runaway slaves and family members find a safe place to hide during the Civil War. Tubman also served as a spy, a nurse and a scout. Later, she became the first African American woman to appear on a postage stamp.

Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. served in the Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II and became the first African American general. He received many honors, including the Bronze Star and the Distinguished Service Medal in 1940. Refusing to surrender his civil duties, he fought to end segregation in the military. In 1948, President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order 9981 announcing that black and white Soldiers and Sailors would be treated equally. Sergeant William H. Carney would be recognized for his military heroic efforts, too. Carney was the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor in February 1863 for his heroism during the Civil War. He was shot twice and wounded by Confederate soldiers, but as he fell to the ground, he held the American flag high and passed it to his fellow soldiers, saying, "Boys, it never touched the ground."

Petty Officer Dorie Miller's heroic acts propelled him into becoming the first African American hero of World War II. When the United States entered World War II in December, 1941, Miller was assigned as a mess attendant aboard USS West Virginia, which was docked at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. On Dec. , 1941, Miller heard airplanes overhead and ran on deck and witnessed Japanese planes attacking his ship with torpedoes. Miller rushed to a machine gun and began firing. By the time the smoke cleared, he had shot down four Japanese planes. Thirty years later, a Navy warship, the USS Miller, was named in his honor.

Even though many of our ancestors fought for education equality, many blacks continue to be left behind. Is the American dream for education equality greatly diminishing among our men and women of color? According to Department of Education statistics it is. On a yearly basis, for example, approximately 613,379 students of the 14,808,821 (4.1 percent) students attending grades K-12 are dropping out of school. And of the 613,379 students, about 212,842 (35 percent) are African American. Subsequently, college enrollment for males is gloomy, too. Between 1970 and 2005, the gender composition has shifted to the extent that women now make up the majority—54 percent—of the 10.8 million young adults enrolled in college. In 2005, about 43 percent

of women ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college, as compared to 35 percent of young men, with African American men representing the lowest number. If male educational attainment continues to decline, the United States' economy and society will be momentarily impacted. With the dropout rate for African American students spiraling downward and out of control, what will be the long-term impact on America's future economically? Who will be our next black inventor, doctor, lawyer or educator?

Moreover, because perception can easily become a reality in reference to the lack of equality and justice within our education, government and justice systems, Black History Month should be a transformative moment for civil discourse of our avoidances and insecurities. We need to reprogram and transform our mindset to better understand the importance of "Listening, Talking, Communicating and Connecting" with each other. Listening, for example, is to make an effort to hear what another person is saying. Talking reflects a subject or topic of open conversation or dialogue in which we can express or exchange ideas by means of spoken words—the interchange of thoughts and opinions. When communicating with others, we should encompass four essential components in our discussion: the visual, the emotional, the volitional and the intellectual, according to author John Maxwell. Connecting is having the ability to identify and relate with people in a way that increases your influence with them and your understanding of their value as people.

According to Maxwell, author of the book "Everyone Communicates Few Connect," "great leaders are those who are able to connect with people, whether it is one-on-one or a group of many." These are the qualities that made Dr. King and his "I Have Dream" speech so genuine. He had the ability to connect with all people. So, "have we made it to the promise land?"

In conclusion, one may ask, "Why should I be concerned about black history?" Black history is an essential part of American history. It is part of the fabric that makes up America's DNA. It is not just the month of February in which we should acknowledge black history. We should embrace the other 11 months of the year to raise issues that are poignant and require bipartisan discussion and understanding, such as institutionalized poverty, job discrimination and failing public schools. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently stated, "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy." America's Black History Month should be used for discussion and understanding cultural differences. It is a time to reflect on our past history and decide how we can use it to promote and motivate future enrichment and acceptance of others' beliefs and religions, and what we can do holistically to move this country forward.

I think we have made major strides in the right direction. As we saw in our last election, a majority of the American people voted to elect the first African American president. Nevertheless, I think we all should take a moment and look through the lens of each other and try to understand, respect and accept our differences. This may help us to

better understand one and other, dilute the fear and detestation that hinder us, and promote the love and peace that will move this country forward.

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

**—The United States Constitution—**

### **References**

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