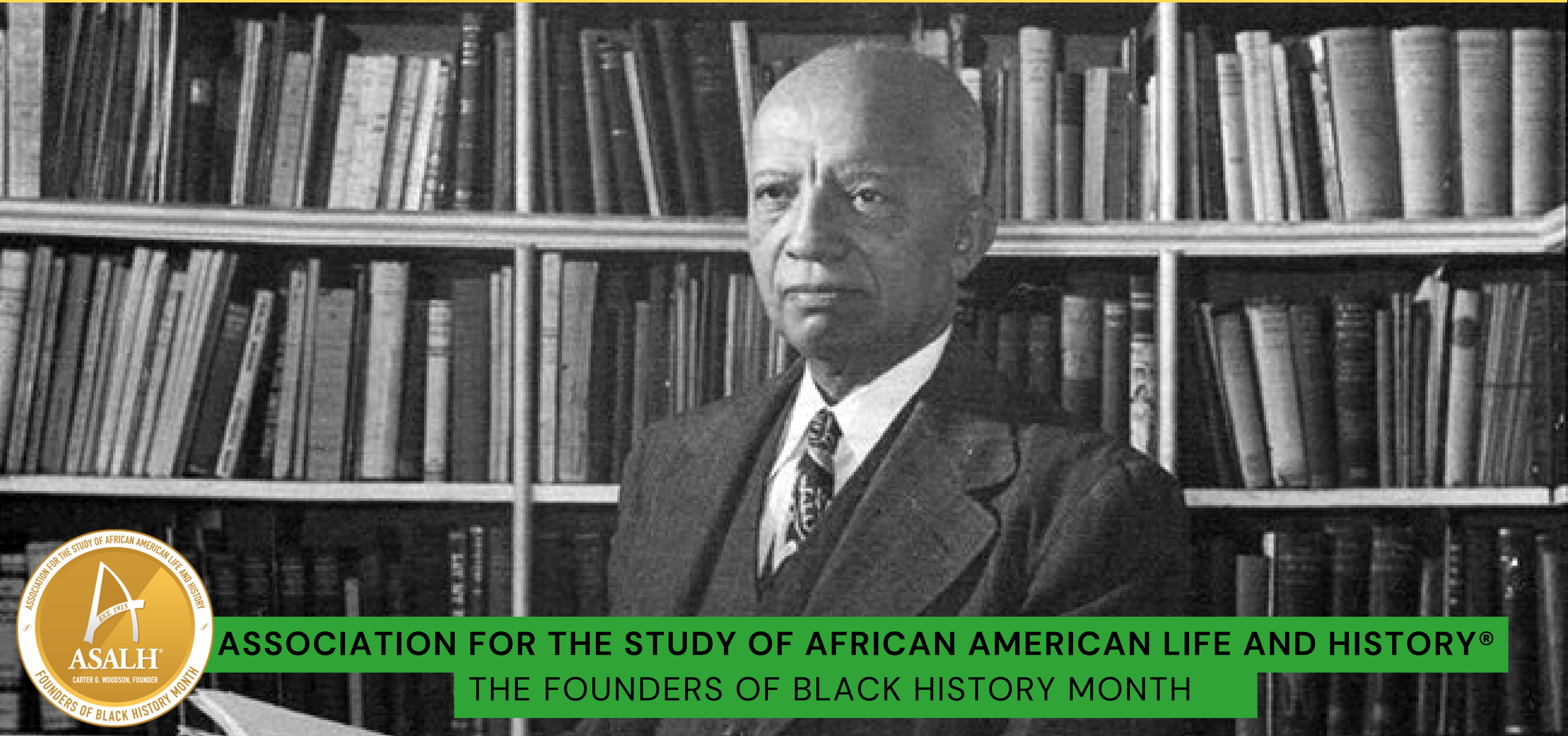


THE ORIGINS OF **BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

BY DARYL MICHAEL SCOTT | ASALH FORMER NATIONAL PRESIDENT



ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY®

THE FOUNDERS OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THE STORY OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH BEGINS IN CHICAGO IN 1915.



An alumnus of the University of Chicago with many friends in the city, Carter G. Woodson traveled from Washington, D.C. to participate in a national celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation sponsored by the state of Illinois.

Thousands of African Americans travelled from across the country to see exhibits highlighting the progress their people had made since the destruction of slavery. Awarded a doctorate in Harvard three years earlier, Woodson joined the other exhibitors with a black history display. Despite being held at the Coliseum, the site of the 1912 Republican convention, an overflow crowd of six to twelve thousand waited outside for their turn to view the exhibits. Inspired by the three-week celebration, Woodson decided to form an organization to promote the scientific study of black life and history before leaving town.

● **SEPTEMBER 9, 1915**

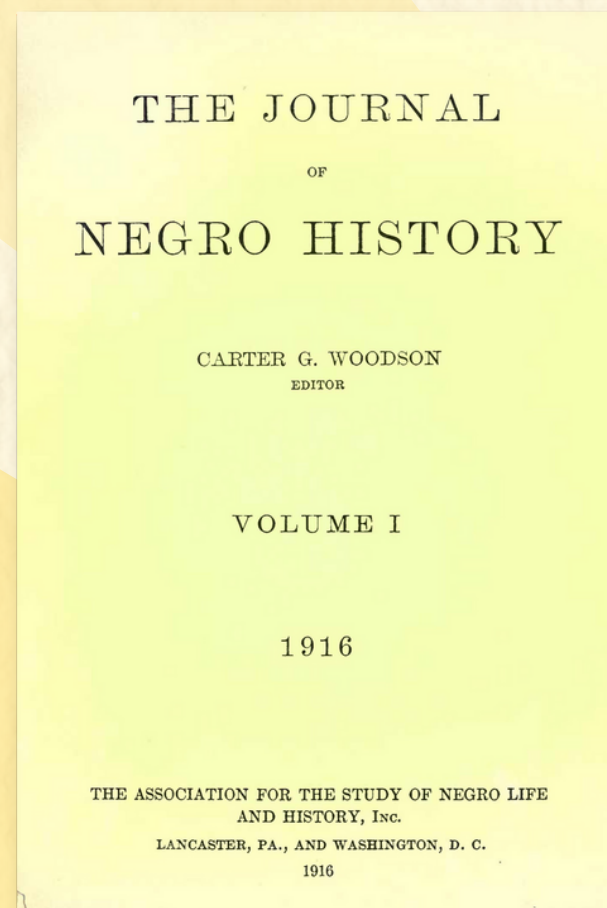
On September 9th, Woodson met at the Wabash YMCA with A. L. Jackson and three others and formed the **Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH)**.

CARTER G. WOODSON

A. S. N. L. H.

NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

1916



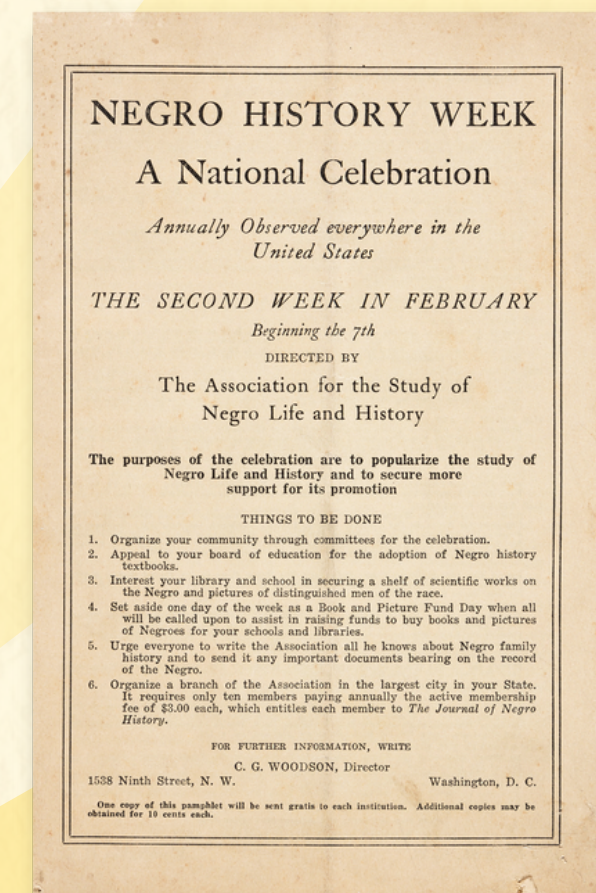
Dr. Woodson publishes
The Journal of Negro History

1924



A graduate member of Omega Psi Phi,
he urged his fraternity brothers to take
up the work. In **1924**, they responded
with the creation of Negro History and
Literature Week, which they renamed
Negro Achievement Week.

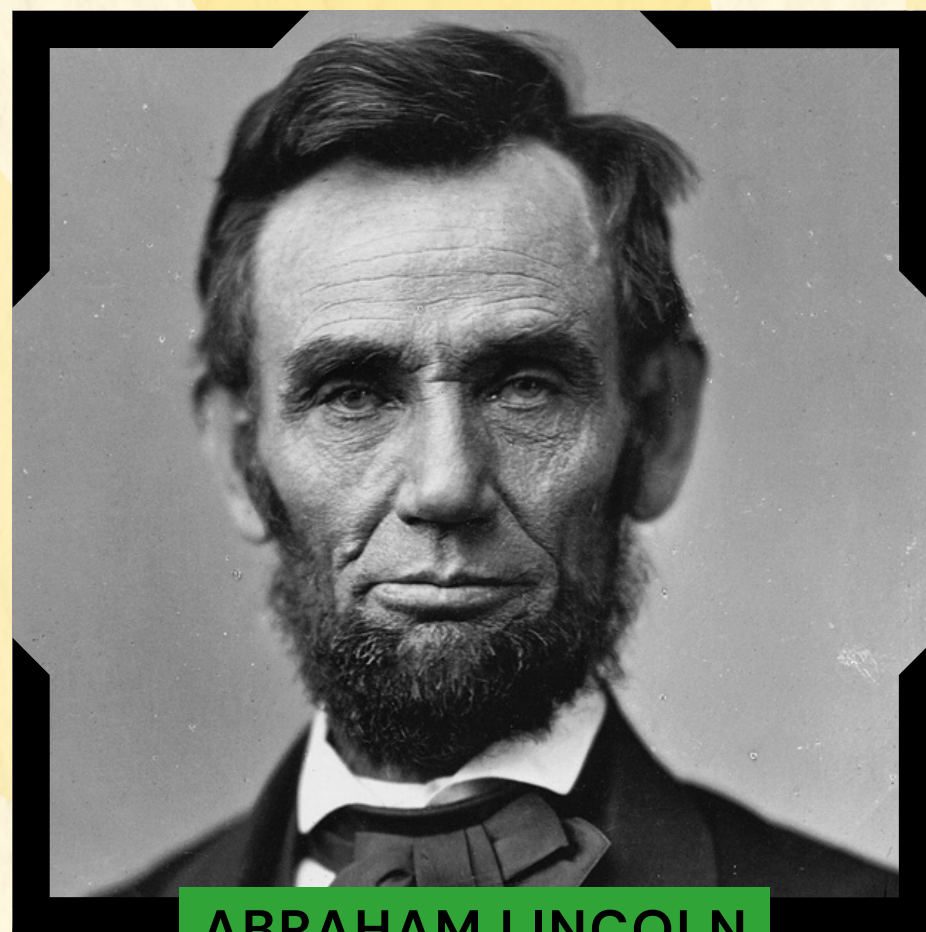
1926



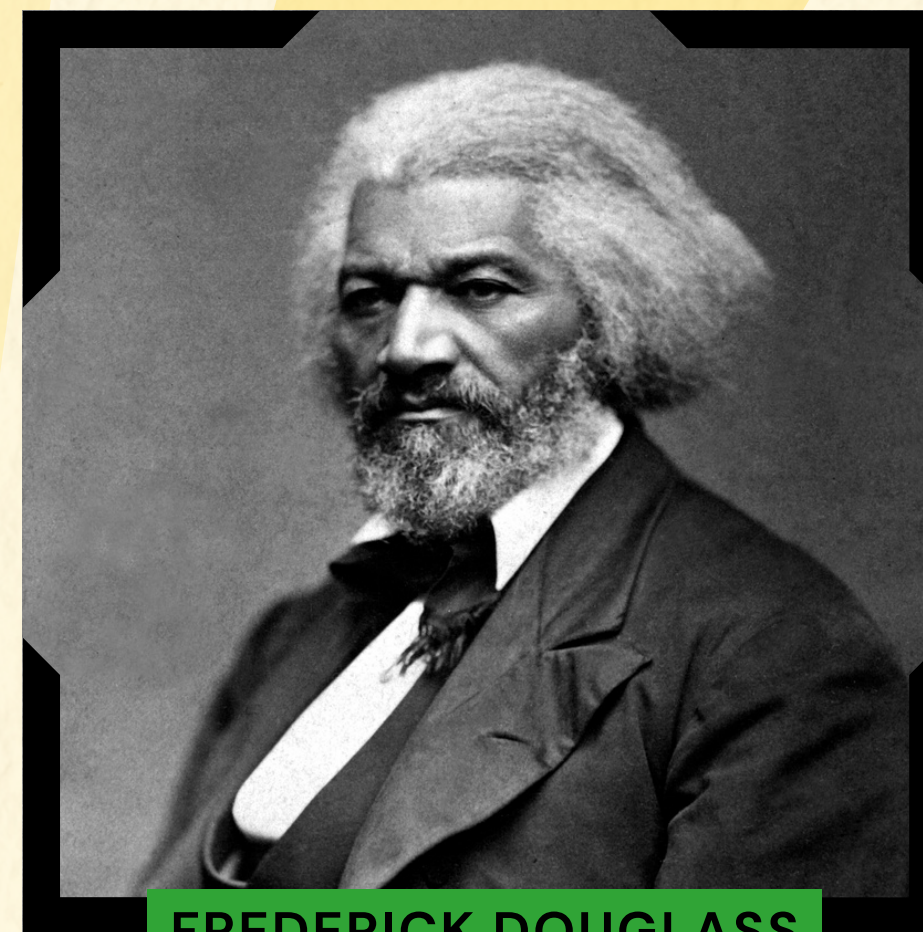
Dr. Woodson sends out a press release announcing
Negro History Week in February, 1926.

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WHY FEBRUARY?



ABRAHAM LINCOLN



FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Woodson chose February for reasons of tradition and reform. It is commonly said that Woodson selected February to encompass the birthdays of two great Americans who played a prominent role in shaping black history, namely **Abraham Lincoln** and **Frederick Douglass**, whose birthdays are the 12th and the 14th, respectively. More importantly, he chose them for reasons of tradition. Since Lincoln's assassination in **1865**, the black community, along with other Republicans, had been celebrating the fallen President's birthday. And since the late **1890s**, black communities across the country had been celebrating Douglass'. Well aware of the pre-existing celebrations, Woodson built Negro History Week around traditional days of commemorating the black past. He was asking the public to extend their study of black history, not to create a new tradition. In doing so, he increased his chances for success.

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NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

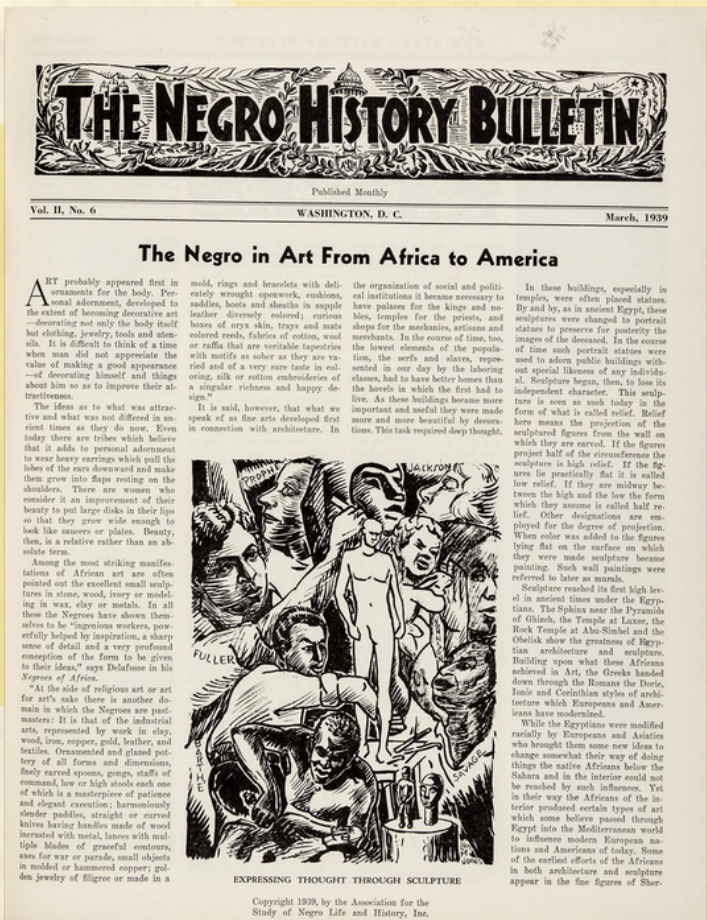


1937

In 1937, at the urging of Mary McLeod Bethune, Woodson established the *Negro History Bulletin*, which focused on the annual theme. As black populations grew, mayors issued Negro History Week proclamations, and in cities like Syracuse progressive whites joined Negro History Week with National Brotherhood Week.

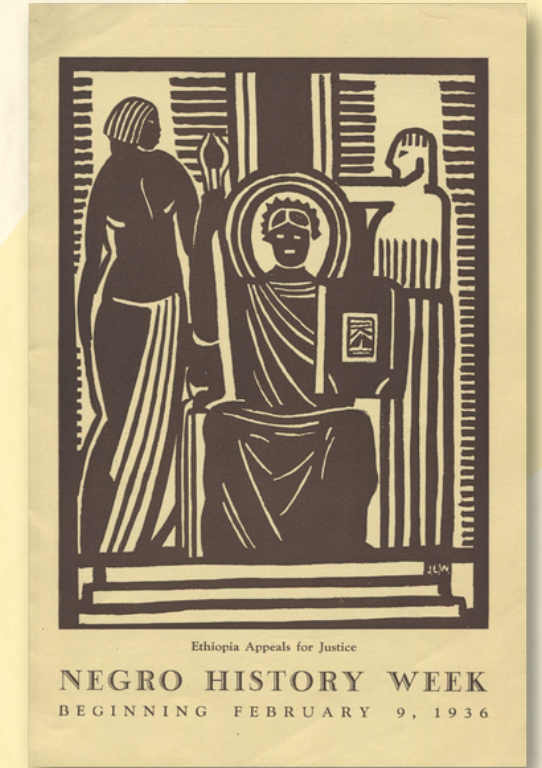


MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE



1930s

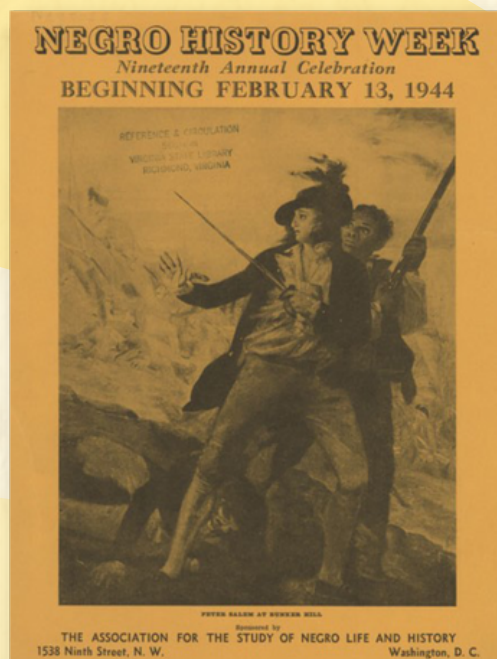
Like most ideas that resonate with the spirit of the times, Negro History Week proved to be more dynamic than Woodson or the Association could control. By the **1930s**, Woodson complained about the intellectual charlatans, black and white, popping up everywhere seeking to take advantage of the public interest in black history. He warned teachers not to invite speakers who had less knowledge than the students themselves. Increasingly publishing houses that had previously ignored black topics and authors rushed to put books on the market and in the schools. Instant experts appeared everywhere, and non-scholarly works appeared from “mushroom presses.” In America, nothing popular escapes either commercialization or eventual trivialization, and so Woodson, the constant reformer, had his hands full in promoting celebrations worthy of the people who had made the history.



Negro History Week booklet, 1936.
Source: George Cleveland Hall Branch Archives

1940s

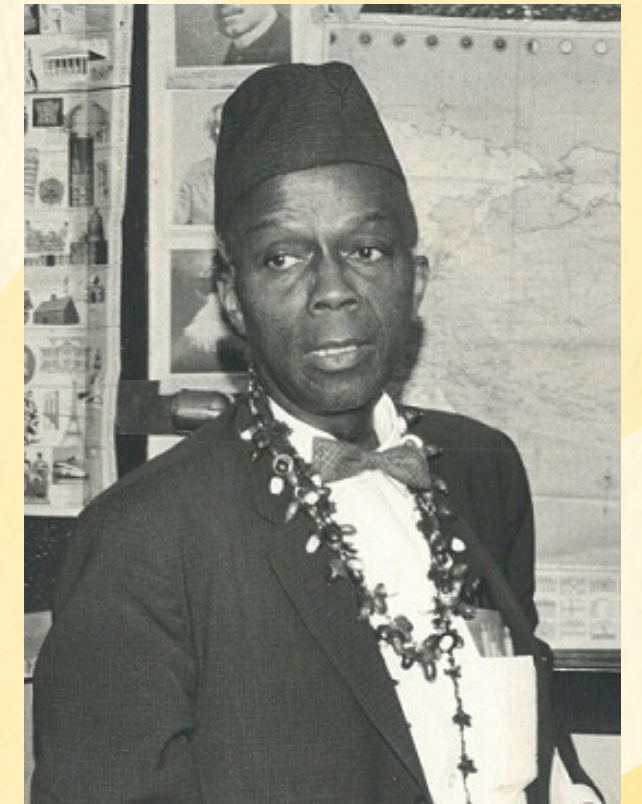
In the **1940s**, efforts began slowly within the black community to expand the study of black history in the schools and black history celebrations before the public. In the South, black teachers often taught Negro History as a supplement to United States history. One early beneficiary of the movement reported that his teacher would hide Woodson’s textbook beneath his desk to avoid drawing the wrath of the principal. During the Civil Rights Movement in the South, the Freedom Schools incorporated black history into the curriculum to advance social change. The Negro History movement was an intellectual insurgency that was part of every larger effort to transform race relations.



Negro History Week booklet, 1944.

1960s

The **1960s** had a dramatic effect on the study and celebration of black history. Before the decade was over, Negro History Week would be well on its way to becoming Black History Month. The shift to a month-long celebration began even before Dr. Woodson's death. As early as **1940s**, blacks in West Virginia, a state where Woodson often spoke, began to celebrate February as Negro History Month. In Chicago, a now forgotten cultural activist, **Fredrick H. Hammaurabi**, started celebrating Negro History Month in the **mid-1960s**. Having taken an African name in the 1930s, Hammaurabi used his cultural center, the House of Knowledge, to fuse African consciousness with the study of the black past. By the **late 1960s**, as young blacks on college campuses became increasingly conscious of links with Africa, Black History Month replaced Negro History Week at a quickening pace. Within the Association, younger intellectuals, part of the awakening, prodded Woodson's organization to change with the times. **They succeeded.**



Frederic H. Hammurabi Robb

Source: Rose Cleveland Hall Branch Archives

1976



In **1976**, fifty years after the first celebration, the Association used its influence to institutionalize the shifts from a week to a month and from Negro history to black history. Since the **mid-1970s**, every American president, Democrat and Republican, has issued proclamations endorsing the Association's annual theme.

Under President Gerald Ford, "Negro History Week" became Black History Month in 1976.

Credit: Sun-Times archives

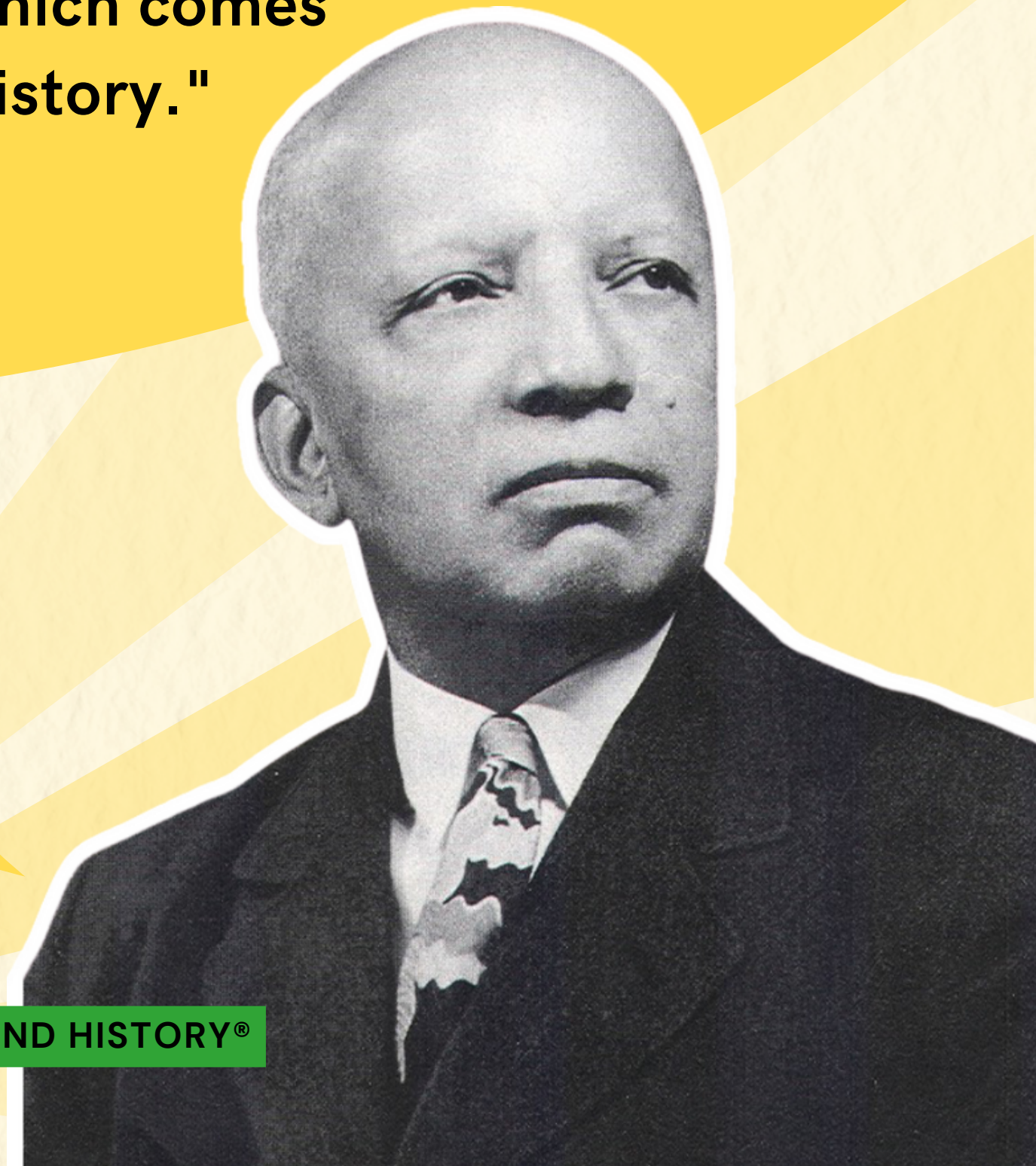


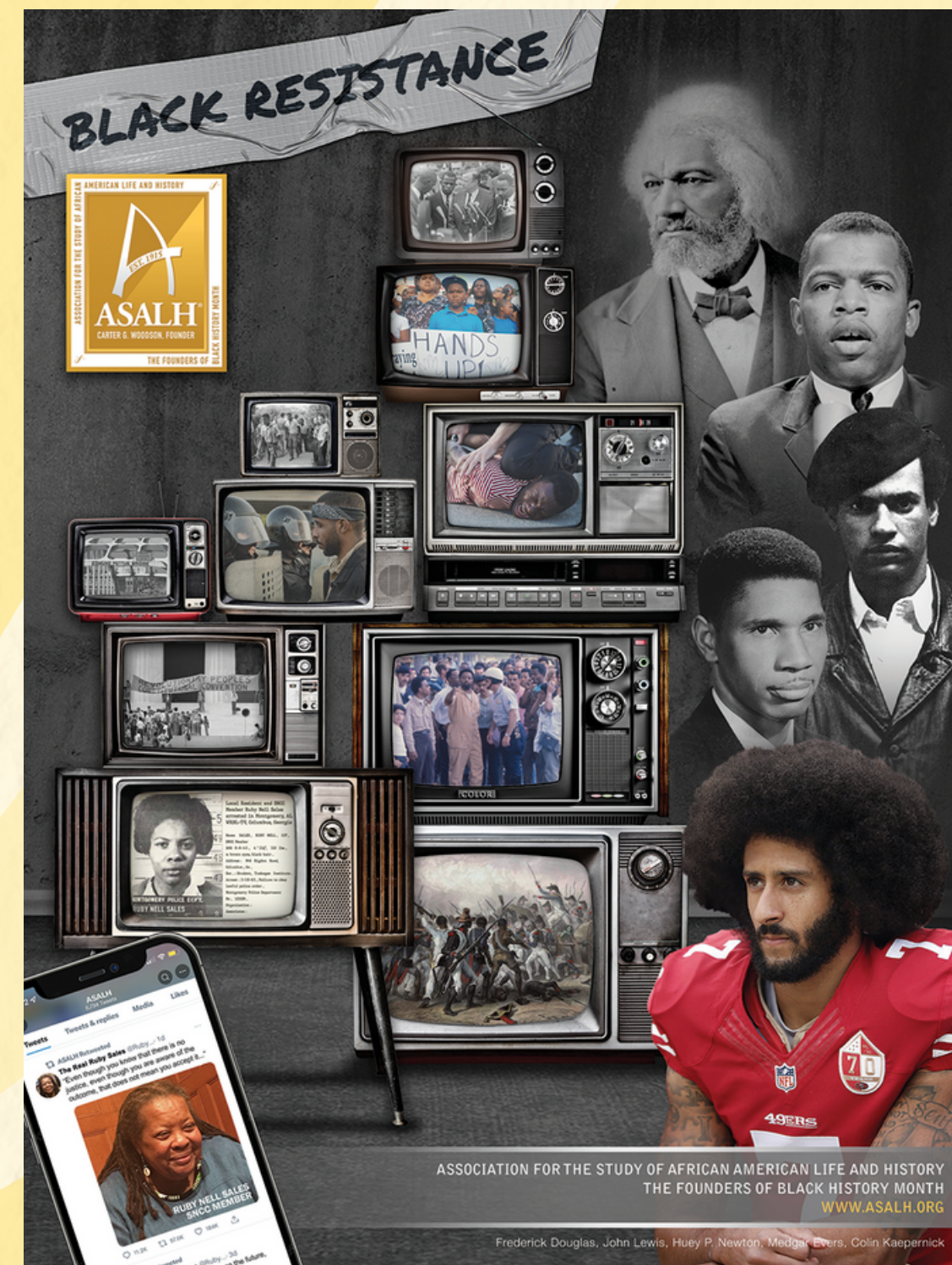
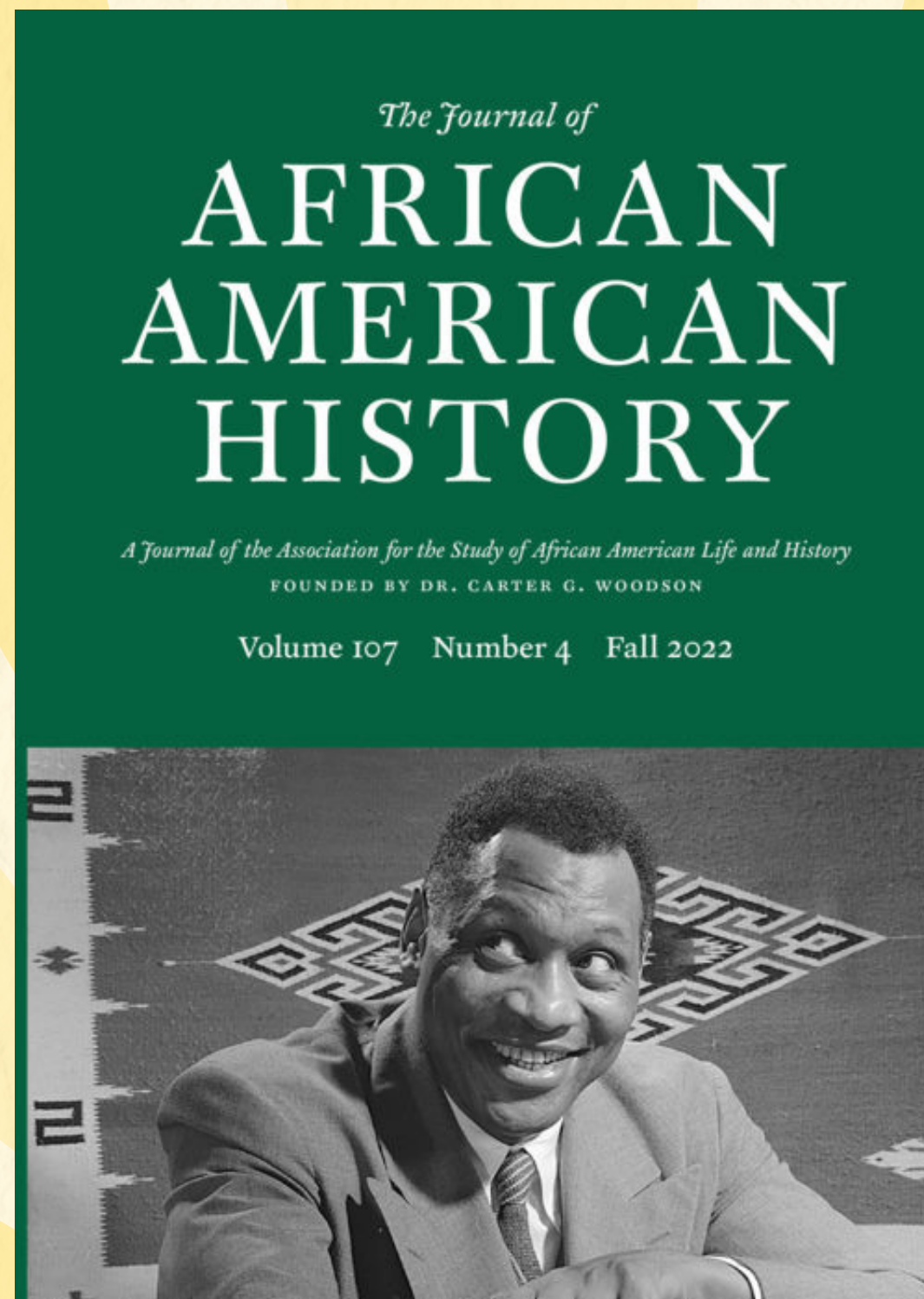
"Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history."

CARTER G. WOODSON

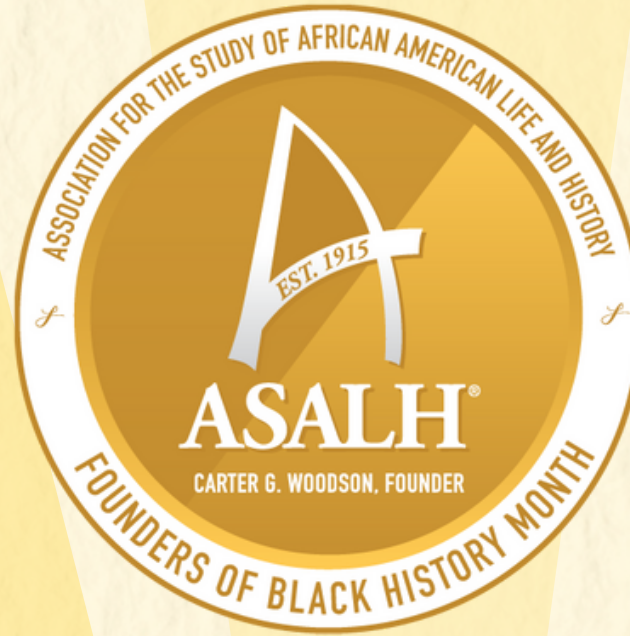
What **Carter G. Woodson** would say about the continued celebrations is unknown, but he would smile on all honest efforts to make black history a field of serious study and provide the public with thoughtful celebrations.

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**SCAN HERE TO READ
THE FULL STORY.**

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