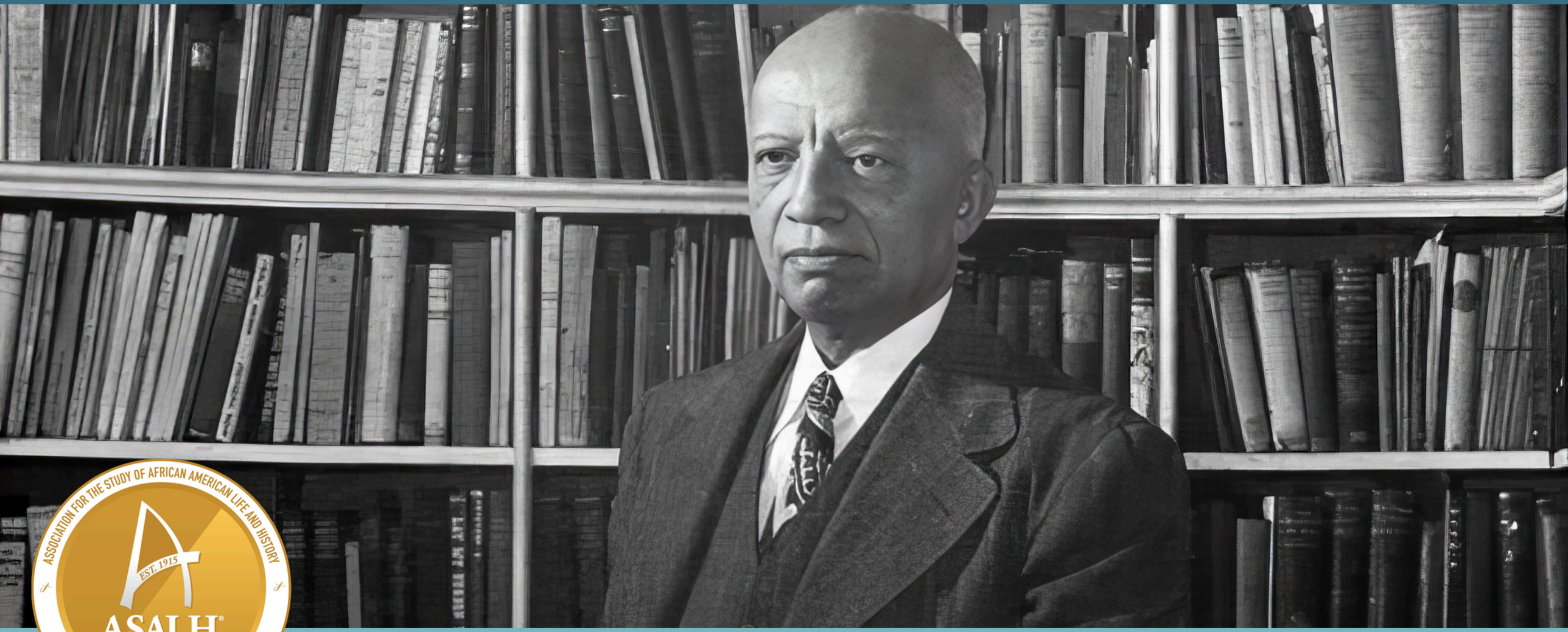
THE ORIGINS OF **BLACK HISTORY MONTH**



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.



CARTER G. WOODSON

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.

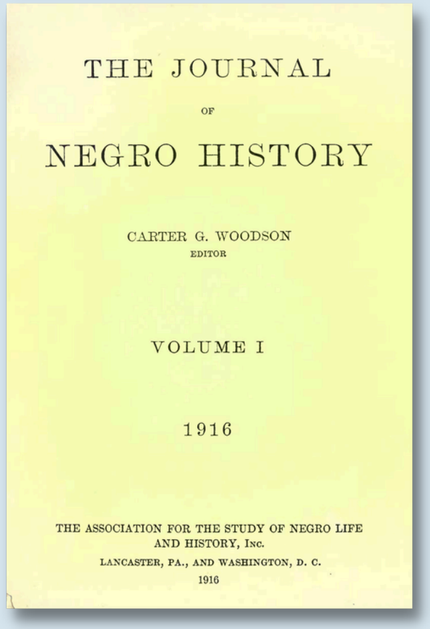
SEPTEMBER 9, 1915

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).**

A. S. N. L. H.

NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

1916


THE JOURNAL
OF
NEGRO HISTORY

CARTER G. WOODSON
EDITOR

VOLUME I

1916

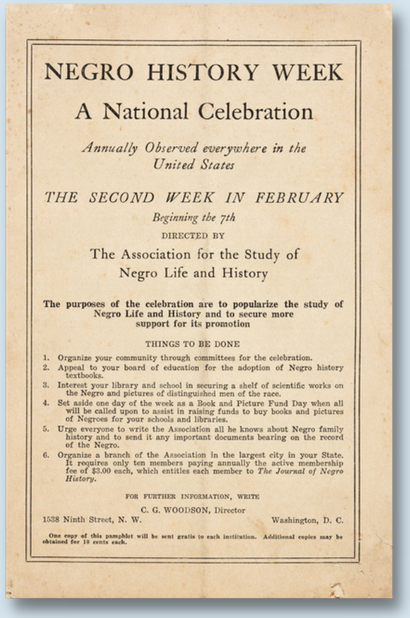
THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF NEGRO LIFE AND HISTORY, Inc.
LANCASTER, PA., AND WASHINGTON, D. C.
1916

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


NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

A National Celebration

Annually Observed everywhere in the United States

THE SECOND WEEK IN FEBRUARY
Beginning the 7th

DIRECTED BY
The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

The purposes of the celebration are to popularize the study of Negro Life and History and to secure more support for its promotion

THINGS TO BE DONE

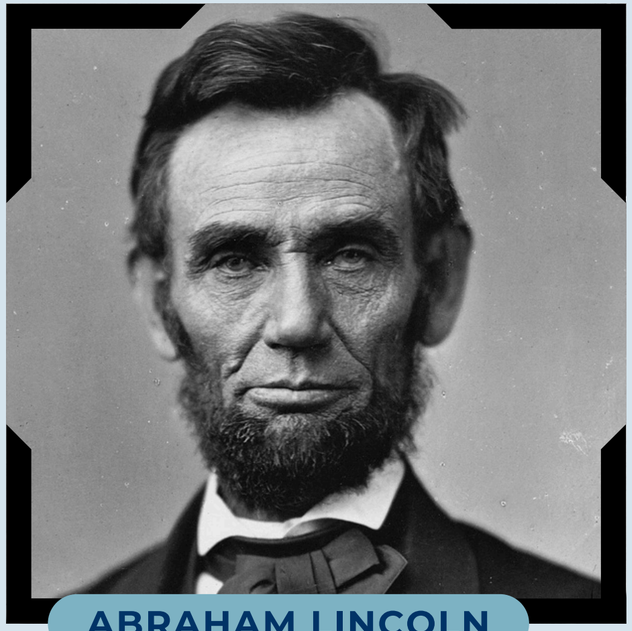
1. Organize your community through committees for the celebration.
2. Appeal to your board of education for the adoption of Negro history textbooks.
3. Interest your library and school in securing a shelf of scientific works on the Negro and pictures of distinguished men of the race.
4. Set aside one day of the week as a Book and Picture Fund Day when all will be called upon to assist in raising funds to buy books and pictures of Negroes for your schools and libraries.
5. Urge everyone to write the Association all he knows about Negro family history and to send it any important documents bearing on the record of the Negro.
6. Organize a branch of the Association in the largest city in your State. It requires only ten members paying annually the active membership fee of $3.00 each, which entitles each member to *The Journal of Negro History*.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, WRITE
C. G. WOODSON, Director
1538 Ninth Street, N. W. Washington, D. C.

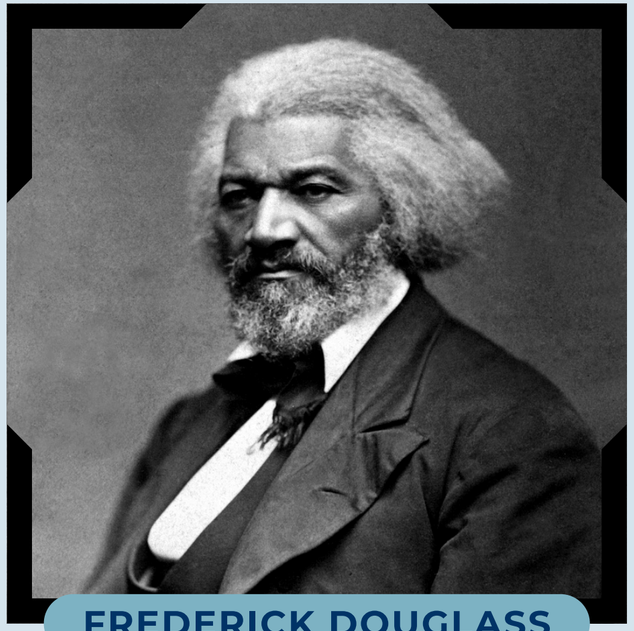
One copy of this pamphlet will be sent gratis to each institution. Additional copies may be obtained for 10 cents each.

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

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.

NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

1937



THE NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

Published Monthly

Vol. II. No. 6 WASHINGTON, D. C. March, 1939

The Negro in Art From Africa to America

ART probably appeared first in ornaments for the body. Personal adornment, developed to the extent of becoming decorative art—decorating not only the body itself but clothing, jewelry, tools and utensils. It is difficult to think of a time when man did not appreciate the value of making a good appearance—of decorating himself and things about him so as to improve their attractiveness.

The ideas as to what was attractive and what was not differed in ancient times as they do now. Even today there are tribes which believe that it adds to personal adornment to wear heavy earrings which pull the lobes of the ears downward and make them grow into flaps resting on the shoulders. There are women who consider it an improvement of their beauty to put large disks in their lips so that they grow wide enough to look like saucers or plates. Beauty, then, is a relative rather than an absolute term.

Among the most striking manifestations of African art are often pointed out the excellent small sculptures in stone, wood, ivory or modeling in wax, clay or metals. In all these the Negroes have shown themselves to be "ingenious workers, powerfully helped by inspiration, a sharp sense of detail and a very profound conception of the form to be given to their ideas," says Delafosse in his *Negroes of Africa*.

"At the side of religious art or art for art's sake there is another domain in which the Negroes are past-masters: It is that of the industrial arts, represented by work in clay, wood, iron, copper, gold, leather, and textiles. Ornamented and glazed pottery of all forms and dimensions, finely carved spoons, gongs, staffs of command, low or high stools each one of which is a masterpiece of patience and elegant execution; harmoniously slender paddles, straight or curved knives having handles made of wood incrusted with metal, knives with multiple blades of graceful contours, axes for war or parade, small objects in molded or hammered copper; golden jewelry of filigree or made in a mold, rings and bracelets with delicately wrought openwork, cushions, saddles, boots and sheaths in supple leather diversely colored; curious bones of oryx skin, trays and mats colored reeds, fabrics of cotton, wool or raffia that are veritable tapestries with motifs as sober as they are varied and of a very rare taste in coloring, silk or cotton embroideries of a singular richness and happy designs."

It is said, however, that what we speak of as fine arts developed first in connection with architecture. In the organization of social and political institutions it became necessary to have palaces for the kings and nobles, temples for the priests, and shops for the mechanics, artisans and merchants. In the course of time, too, the lowest elements of the population, the serfs and slaves, represented in our day by the laboring classes, had to have better homes than the hovels in which the first had to live. As these buildings became more important and useful they were made more and more beautiful by decorations. This task required deep thought.

In these buildings, especially in temples, were often placed statues. By and by, as in ancient Egypt, these sculptures were changed to portrait statues to preserve for posterity the images of the deceased. In the course of time such portrait statues were used to adorn public buildings without special likeness of any individual. Sculpture began, then, to lose its independent character. This sculpture is seen as such today in the form of what is called relief. Relief means the projection of the sculptured figures from the wall on which they are carved. If the figures project half of the circumference the projection is half. If the figures project less than this it is called low relief. If the figures project between the high and the low the form which they assume is called half relief. Other designations are employed for the degree of projection. When color was added to the figures lying flat on the surface on which they were made sculpture became painting. Such wall paintings were referred to later as mosaics.

Sculpture reached its first high level in ancient times under the Egyptians. The Sphinx near the Pyramids of Ghizeh, the Temple at Luxor, the Rock Temple at Abu-Simbel and the Obelisk show the greatness of Egyptian architecture and sculpture. Building upon what these Africans achieved in Art, the Greeks handed down through the Romans the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian styles of architecture which Europeans and Americans have modernized.

While the Egyptians were modified racially by Europeans and Asiatics who brought them some new ideas to change somewhat their way of doing things the native Africans below the Sahara and in the interior could not be reached by such influences. Yet in their way the Africans of the interior produced certain types of art which some believe passed through Egypt into the Mediterranean world to influence modern European nations and Americans of today. Some of the earliest efforts of the Africans in both architecture and sculpture appear in the fine figures of Shere-

EXPRESSING THOUGHT THROUGH SCULPTURE

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THE NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

Published Monthly

Vol. I. No. 1. WASHINGTON, D. C. October, 1937

The Thrilling Escape of William and Ellen Craft

ELLEN CRAFT

WILLIAM CRAFT

WILLIAM CRAFT, a smart, active, enterprising young man, and Ellen, a gentle, beautiful young woman, were slaves on the rice Georgia plantation. Their master knew they loved each other, so he gave them permission to marry.

One day, William said to his wife, "Ellen, our master has allowed us to marry. But in slavery we can never really be man and wife. We do not belong to each other. We belong to our master. We are his property. He can sell us whenever he wishes. We are happy now, but tomorrow, you may be sold away from me, or I may be sold away from you. Our happiness may end at any moment. There is only one way to avoid this. In some way we must become free."

"I understand, very perfectly, William," said Ellen, "but there is no way for us to be free. Why worry about things which you cannot change? You cannot destroy slavery. Those slaves who have tried to strike down their owners have failed. Uprisings which they have planned have been checked at the start. A few slaves have worked hard for years and with their savings have purchased their freedom. Occasionally others have been freed by kind masters when they have rendered faithful service. A number of fugitives, following the north star and assisted by friends, have reached the land of freedom, but tears come to my eyes when I see that all these ways seem closed to us."

"I have the idea," said William. "It came to me last evening when I was asleep. We shall run away."

"How shall we do it?" asked Ellen.

"I have solved the problem of our freedom," said William. "Here is how we'll do it. You will dress up like our young master in one of his suits. You will have your hair cut like that of a young man. You are fair enough to be taken for white. Ellen, dear, you will look like a young planter elegantly dressed in a sleek and high-heeled boots."

"Freedom is dear," said Ellen, "and our lives will be endangered possible to obtain it; but how can a woman stand such a long and hard journey from Macon, Georgia, to some northern point in New York, Massachusetts or Canada? How can I continue pretending that I am a man when I am questioned at close range or when I am approached as if I were a man?"

"That will be easy," said William. "Muffle your face so if you were suffering from a toothache. This will prevent people from finding out who you are. This will also keep persons from knowing that you haven't a beard."

"That sounds all right for the traveling from place to place," said Ellen. "But what about stopping here and there for food and shelter? There are well-to-do free Negroes in Charleston, Richmond, and Baltimore, but a young white master would not safely stop with them. He would be taken for one of them. Many free colored people are almost white. We shall have to stop with white people or at hotels. How can I register as one when I can neither read nor write?"

"I have thought of that, too," said William. "You will just young right arm in a sling, keep a little with a cane in your left hand, act as if you were injured on the way, pretend that you are a little hard of hearing, keep those green spectacles over your eyes, and show that you must depend upon me, your servant, for everything you want. The clerk will sign the hotel book for you, and will hear me stand by to give you close attention."

Ellen agreed to make the dash for freedom. The clothes were brought, the carriage was prepared, and they decided to leave on the following Saturday. This would give the runaways forty-eight hours to travel before their escape would be known. There was to be a holiday from Saturday evening until Monday when they would be missed for the first time.

Ellen was ready at the appointed time. She looked like the young master. William, full of pluck and natural ability, was a fine, strong man. He was very attentive to his "young master." He was wise, sure, hands and feet for "him." Ellen had little to say or to do except to attend to the "ailments" which she was supposed to have and to act like a master. She would not accept acquaintance with those attracted to her and would pretend to be deaf while William, the "servant," explained the illness of the "young master." Many instances of the kind occurred, but William was always ready to make an explanation which prevented closer approach with his "master."

"We are now approaching a city," said William. "This is Charleston. I know a little about this place. My master once brought me here as his servant."

(Continued on page 5)

ON THE WAY TO FREEDOM

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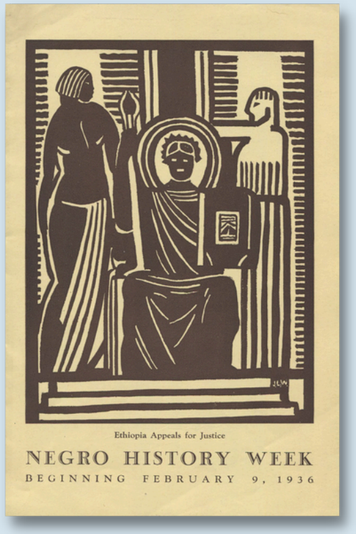
In **1937**, at the urging of **Mary McLeod Bethune**, Woodson established the ***Negro History Bulletin***, which focused on the annual theme. As black populations grew, mayors issued Negro History Week proclamations, and in cities like Syracuse progressive whites joined Negro History Week with National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



MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

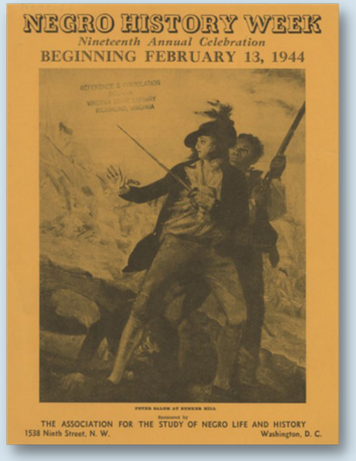
1930s

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

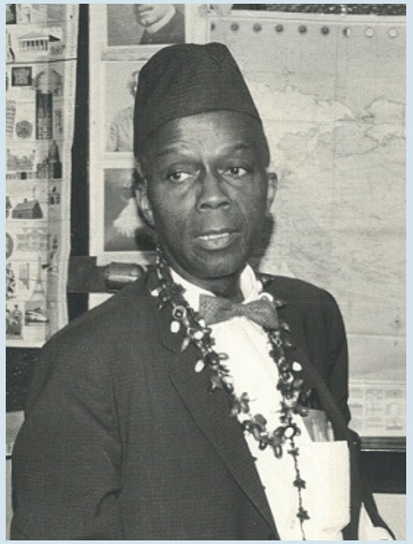


Negro History Week booklet, 1944.

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.

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 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



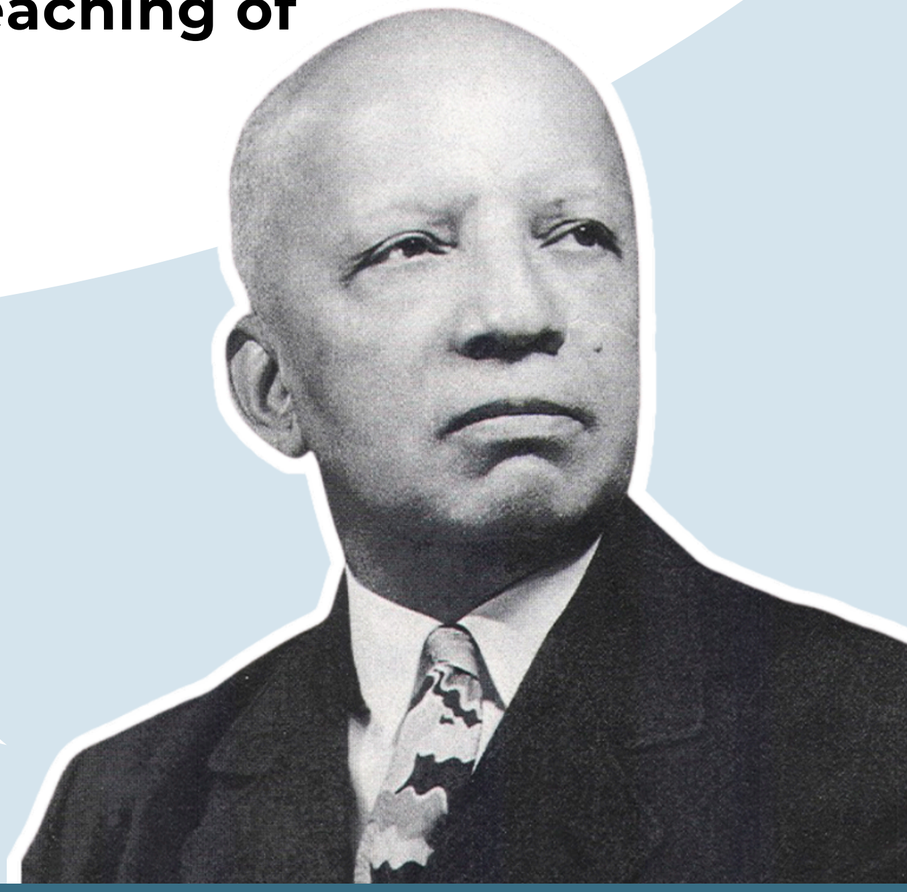
Under President Gerald Ford, "Negro History Week" became Black History Month in 1976. Credit: Sun-Times archives

1976

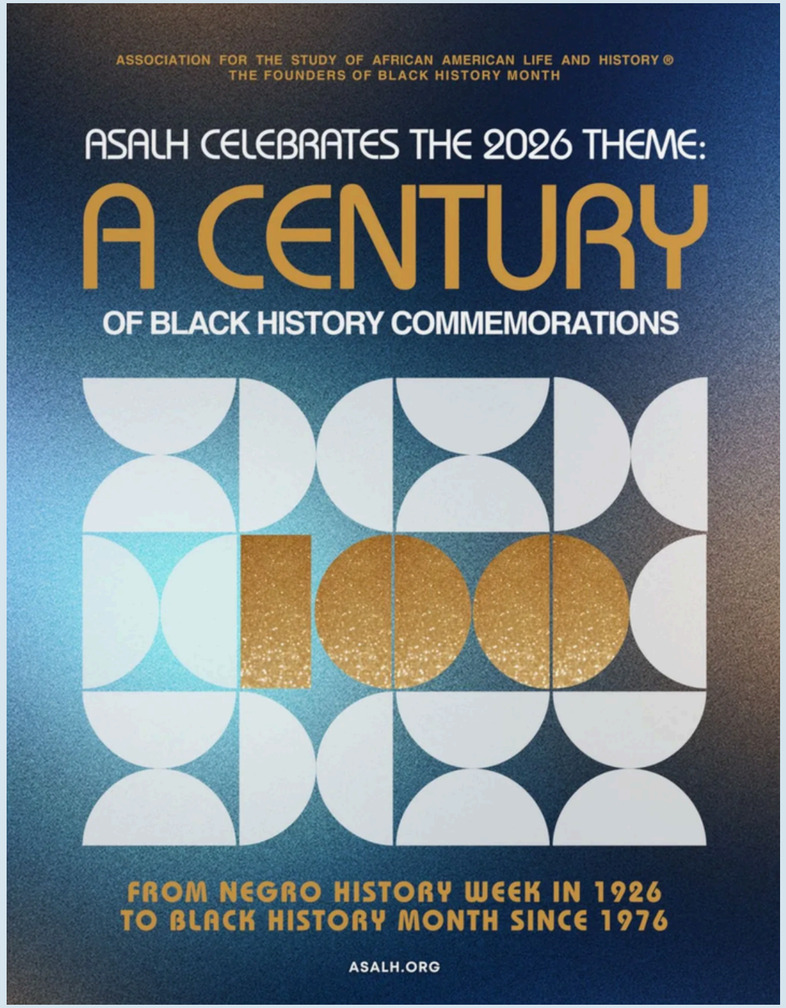
In **1976**, fifty years after the first celebration, the Association used its influence to institutionalize the shifts from a week to a month and from Negro history to black history. Since the **mid-1970s**, every American president, Democrat and Republican, has issued proclamations endorsing the Association's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

"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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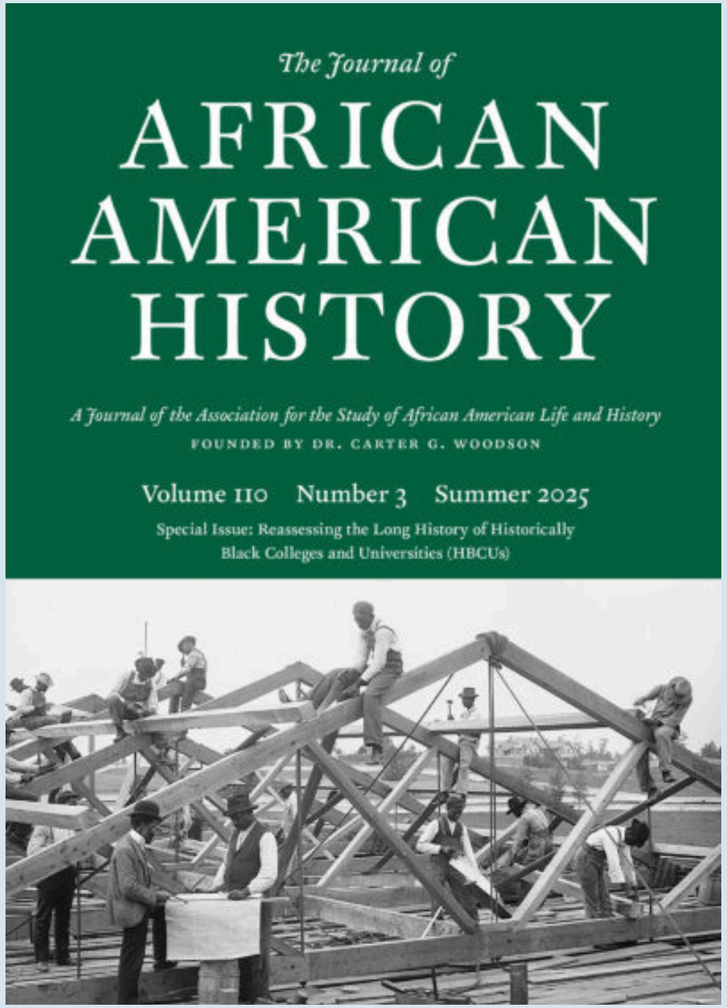
THE FOUNDERS OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH
ASALH CELEBRATES THE 2026 THEME:
A CENTURY
OF BLACK HISTORY COMMEMORATIONS
FROM NEGRO HISTORY WEEK IN 1926
TO BLACK HISTORY MONTH SINCE 1976
ASALH.ORG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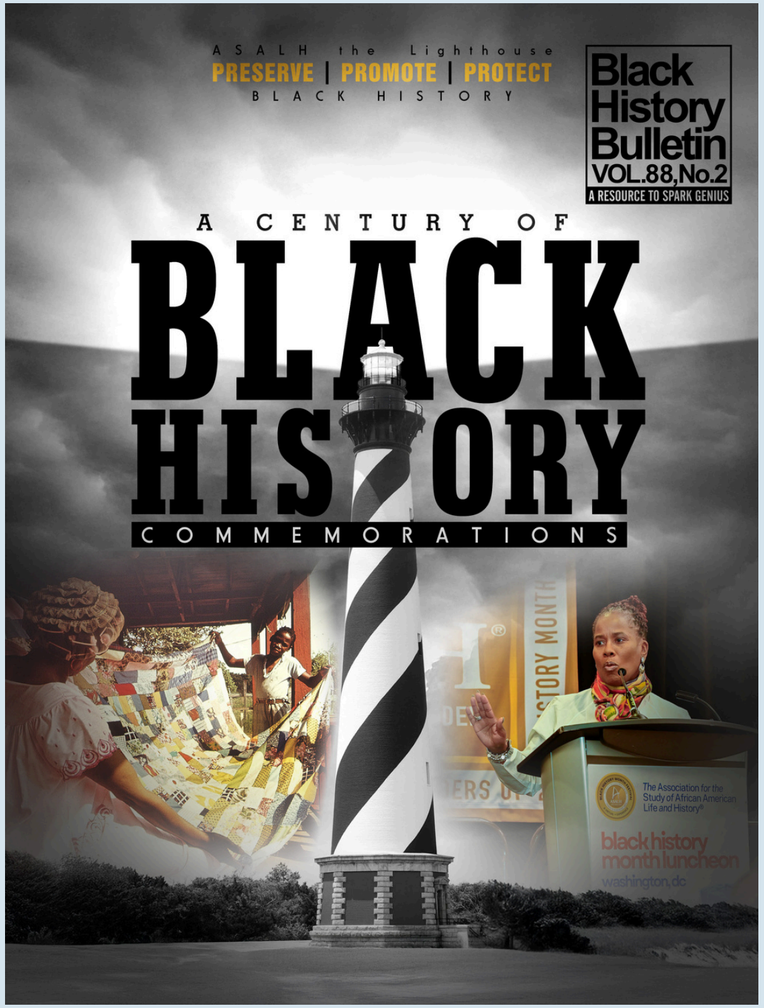
ASALH the Lighthouse
PRESERVE | PROMOTE | PROTECT
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VOL.88,No.2
A RESOURCE TO SPARK GENIUS
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THE ORIGINS OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH