

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD



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1. How many of you have a good understanding of past history?

2. Understanding Black history is crucial for several reasons:

a. **Insight into Experiences:** Learning about African American history provides insight into the experiences, struggles, and triumphs of Black individuals in America. It helps us understand the challenges they faced and how they overcame them.

b. **Impact on Current Issues:** Black history sheds light on how historical experiences continue to impact current societal issues. By studying this history, we gain a deeper understanding of systemic racism, inequality, and discrimination.

c. **Ending Racism:** Knowledge of Black history contributes to ending racism. It helps dispel stereotypes and fosters empathy, promoting a more inclusive society.

- d. **Full Narrative: Recognizing the important roles of Black individuals in shaping the United States ensures a comprehensive understanding of our nation's history. Black history is an integral part of the larger narrative, and acknowledging it enriches our collective knowledge.**
- ❖ **In essence, Black history is not limited to a single month; it's a continuous journey of learning and understanding that extends beyond February.**

3. Black History Month

February is celebrated as Black History Month (BHM), which highlights African American history and the contributions of Black people in the United States.

It has been almost 100 years since Carter G Woodson, known as “*the father of Black history*”, started Negro History Week in 1926, which set the stage for what is now known as **Black History Month**. The annual event is now observed across several countries.

Each February the accomplishments and history of African Americans are celebrated in Black History Month. What does that mean? When was Black History Month first recognized? Why was February selected? Excellent questions and to understand the purpose of Black History Month, you need to know more about its founder, Carter G. Woodson (1876-1950).

Born in 1876 to formerly enslaved parents, Carter G. Woodson was an author, historian, and educator. As a child, he worked on his family's farm and as a teen worked in West Virginia's coal mines. Childhood labor prohibited Woodson from regularly attending school, but it didn't stop his pursuit of knowledge. As an adult, he worked as a teacher, principal, and later a college professor. He earned a bachelor's degree from Berea College in Kentucky and a master's degree from the University of Chicago. Woodson also holds the distinction of being the second African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University, after W.E.B. DuBois.

Carter G. Woodson's vision of a designated celebration of Black history and culture has been realized, but what does that mean in 2024? Woodson believed that Black history and culture “were overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and the teachers who use them.” See also Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Woodson's beliefs still resonate today as we battle culture wars filled with banned books, efforts to suppress Black history, and the weaponization of critical race theory. In fact, Indiana's General Assembly is currently considering a bill that would prohibit students from learning about the struggles of our ancestors.

History is reckoning with the hard truths of what occurred in the past and the implications that past has on our society today. That reckoning must be deliberate and addressed daily and must

uplift the triumphs and trials of Black Americans, but also address the systemic methods to maintain white supremacy. Black history is American history, every day, 365.

4. What's the danger of miseducation?

- Black people of our ancestor's day were being culturally indoctrinated, rather than taught, in American schools.
- There's a distortion of Black life in the history and literature taught in schools and universities.
- The education system created for Black Americans after Emancipation was "largely a prompting of philanthropy", meaning that it was not prepared to truly educate anyone.
- The Failure to Learn to Make a Living: The propaganda present in schools leads educated Black people to abandon their communities while those who do not attend school are stuck in vocational pathways with little room for upward mobility.

5. Is black history still relevant today?

The question that faces us today is whether or not Black History Month is still relevant? Is it still a vehicle for change? Or has it simply become one more school assignment that has limited meaning for children? Has Black History Month become a time when television and the media stack their black material? Or is it a useful concept whose goals have been achieved? Only a few rednecks - could deny the presence and importance of African Americans to American society.

Is it not time to retire Black History Month as we have eliminated white and colored signs on drinking fountains?

Despite the profound change in race relations that has occurred in our lives, the vision for black history as a means of transformation and change is still quite relevant and quite useful.

6. How important is it for us to understand Black History?

The chains of slavery are gone but we are all not yet free. The great diversity within the black community needs the glue of the African American past to remind us of not just how far we have traveled, and how far there is to go.

7. Five concerns that Black history can help us with.

I have five concerns or challenges that African Americans face that black history can help address:

The Challenge of Forgetting

You can tell a great deal about a country and a people by what they deem important enough to remember, to create moments for, and what they put in their museums.

I would suggest that we learn even more about a country by what it chooses to forget **its mistakes, its disappointments, and its embarrassments**. In some ways, African American History month is a clarion call to remember. Yet it is a call that is often unheeded.

The Smithsonian Institution decided to survey 10,000 Americans. The results were fascinating **92%** of white respondents felt slavery had little meaning to them — these respondents often said, “my family did not arrive until after the end of slavery.” Even more disturbing was the fact that **79%** of African Americans expressed no interest or some embarrassment about slavery.

Slavery is an African American success story because **we found ways to survive, to preserve our culture and our families**. We should not be embarrassed by my slave ancestors; We should be in awe of their strength and their humanity. It’s our job to teach the African American community about its connection to our slave past.

Though the slaves were bought, they were also brave. Though they were sold, they were also strong.

The Challenge of Preserving a People’s Culture

While the African American community is no longer invisible, as a community are we taking the appropriate steps to ensure the preservation of African American culture in appropriate institutions. Whether we like it or not, museums, archives, and libraries not only preserve culture, they legitimize it. Therefore, it is incumbent of African Americans to work with cultural institutions to preserve their family photography, documents, and objects.

A good example is the Smithsonian, when the National Museum of American History wanted to mount an exhibition on slavery, it found it did not have any objects that described slavery. That is partially a response to a lack of giving by the African American Community. This lack of involvement also affects the preservation of black historic sites. Though there has been more attention paid to these sites, too much of our history has been paved over, gone through urban renewal, gentrified, or unidentified, or un-acknowledged. Hopefully a renewed Black History Month can focus attention on the importance of preserving African American culture.

There is no more powerful force than a people steeped in their history. And there is no higher cause than honoring our struggle and ancestors by remembering.

The Challenge of Maintaining a community

As the African American Community diversifies and splinters, it is crucial to find mechanisms and opportunities to maintain our sense of community. As some families lose the connection with their southern roots, it is imperative that we understand our common heritage and history. The communal nature of black life has provided substance, guidance, and comfort for generations. And though our communities are quite diverse, it is our common heritage that continues to hold us together.

The Power of Inspiration

One thing has not changed. That is the need to draw inspiration and guidance from the past. And through that inspiration, people will find tools and paths that will help them live their lives. Who could not help but be inspired by Martin Luther King's oratory, commitment to racial justice, and his ultimate sacrifice?

Conclusion:

Black History Month continues to serve us well. In part because Woodson's creation is as much about today as it is about the past. Experiencing Black History Month every year reminds us that history is not dead or distant from our lives.

African American History and its celebration throughout February helps us to remember there is no more powerful force than a people steeped in their history. And there is no higher cause than honoring our struggle and ancestors by remembering.