

Black History Month

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Sixth Sunday in Epiphany

Black History Month begins in Chicago during the summer of 1915 when 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. 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 saying "We are going back to that beautiful history and it is going to inspire us to greater achievements." He sent out a press release announcing Negro History Week in February, 1926.

In February, both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas had birthdays in both were widely recognized for their contributions to abolish slavery. Woodson believed that history was made by the people, not simply or primarily by great men. He envisioned the study and celebration of the Negro as a race, not simply as the producers of a great man. And Lincoln, however great, had not freed the slaves—the Union Army, including hundreds of thousands of black soldiers and sailors, had done that. Rather than focusing on two men, the black community, he believed, should focus on the countless black men and women who had contributed to the advance of human civilization.

As a result of Woodson's work, Negro History Week appeared across the country in schools and before the public. Its popularity continued to grow. Well before his death in 1950, Woodson believed that the weekly celebrations—not the study or celebration of black history—would eventually come to an end. In fact, Woodson never viewed black history as a one-week affair. He pressed for schools to use Negro History Week to demonstrate what students learned all year.

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. 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. In 1976, fifty years after the first celebration, the shifts from a week to a month and from Negro history to black history were nationally recognized.

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.

So, this month, you need to ask yourself "What are you doing to foster thoughtful celebrations and serious study for the vital contributions of black history that is crucial in our history? "