

THE EVOLUTION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH



By Janice Lindsay Reed

When you evaluate your life, can you reflect and say that you have been profoundly influenced by the foundation that African Americans have made in the United States? Well, even if you think not, you have been affected. You may be thinking, "How can anyone tell me who has influenced me?" The point is that everyone in the U.S. has benefited from the hard labor and ideas of African Americans.

If I told you that February has been designated as Black History Month, you would probably yawn and ask why I am telling you things that you already know. Although most people know that they should care about the contributions of Black America, unfortunately, like other holidays, the original meaning becomes diluted with the idea of merely celebrating the holiday.

In search of the true meaning of Black History Month, let's take it back to the beginning? The man with a vision was Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson. Dr. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, began pushing for "Negro History Week" in 1926. Designating the second week of

February as "Negro History Week" because Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass's birthdays fell during this time, Dr. Woodson established this time period as a means to examine the contributions of African Americans. By 1976, 50 years later, that week had been extended to a month.

Even though Dr. Woodson's goal of a "Negro History Week" has not only been achieved, but even enhanced to a month-long celebration, one must question whether or not his dream is sufficient enough to meet the needs of today's society. There are people, such as Earl Ofari Hutchinson, who feel that Black History Month is simply an "established tradition." Instead of focusing on a month of celebrating Black achievement, Hutchinson says, "Black contributions to American society should be celebrated every month."

If the celebration transformed from one week to one month, it is not difficult to envision that the United States would further extend the time period devoted to Black History. In the event that another change occurs, when will it occur?

Another 50 years after the last change? Who will lead the forefront for a new proposal? My answer to these questions is simple: the change starts now and begins with you and me.

Why should anyone wait for this country to tell him when he can celebrate his ancestors or the people who laid the foundation for this nation? If Blacks had to struggle to become citizens, why would it be easier for Blacks to establish recognition dates of their struggle? One has to take the initiative to embrace the achievements of African Americans so that the memory of those who brought our nation thus far is never forgotten.

Don't think of the fact that Black History Month is only 28 days (this year, it is 29 days long due a Leap Year) as a limiting factor. Look at it from this perspective: Black History Month is an opportunity for us to re-evaluate our progress. As long as we take the time to seek knowledge about our past, we will always know where we are going because we can educate each other along the way.

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