

# Black History Month

## IN PERSPECTIVE

by Dr. Phillip McGuire

Historically, African-American history has been largely what white historians have said it was. It has been their interpretations that are most familiar to both black and white America. More often than not, the interpretations that emerged had the effect of forcing most African-Americans to suffer feelings of debasement and the psychic trauma of nondescriptness. These inglorious historians took it upon themselves to distort a people's heritage and, in many respects, to neglect completely the history of African-Americans by refusing to admit that black America had a past worth recording.

It was not until the late 1950's and early 1960's that many Americans began to read of the significant contributions of the African-American. Having been long neglected, the African-American finally captured the intellect and imaginations of objective white historians who began to rewrite what the ignoble ones had sought to perpetuate. However, it is significant for Americans, all Americans, to know that since the mid-1800's African-American historians such as William Wells Brown, William Still, and George Washington Williams, to name a few, pioneered in establishing the black experience as a respectable and vital entity that touches every aspect of American life. Unfortunately, the historical community chose to deny or ignore much of what African-American scholars had to say. Most university and commercial presses simply refused to pub-

lish their works. This, of course, resulted in an unbalanced and subjective interpretation of the African-American experience.

Thus it was in 1916 that Dr. Carter Goodwin Woodson, known as the father of African-American history, established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History for the purpose of fostering a balanced and positive understanding of the African-American heritage through a systematic and scientific study of the black experience. He, Dr. William E. B. DuBois, and others wrote of the African-American because they believed it would alleviate the position of African-Americans in American society by re-educating both black and white America to a greater appreciation of the race. They also hoped that it would inspire future generations of Americans to live in brotherhood. They, too, were of the mindset that "the final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced."

In 1926, Dr. Woodson began the first annual observance of "Negro History Week" to provide an effective educational tool for the American public. More importantly, the observance of this week was begun because Dr. Woodson believed that race prejudice was the result of historical writings and teaching that either ignored or denied the existence of black

achievements and contributions. He also felt that if Americans were to build for themselves a truly democratic society, then not one of them should be denied the equality of opportunity.

As we pay special tribute to the African-American experience in February during our observance of what has grown into "Black History Month," we must reaffirm that in the development of America, North Carolina, and Fayetteville, the African-American experience is more than a few events and biographies that were usually sensationalized by earlier American historians, episodes such as the Boston Massacre featuring Crispus Attucks, the Underground Railroad starring the legendary Harriet Tubman, the Civil War and the ubiquitous Frederick Douglass, and that trite old saga of Booker T. Washington.

These epochs and figures are important, but all Americans must be exposed, for example, to the fact that African-Americans have been participants in every phase of America's development; that black physicists worked to the finish on the Manhattan Project, which produced the atomic bomb that ended the Second World War; that in 1942 Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson admitted in his diary that the Army Classification Tests were deliberately manipulated in order to make

all African-Americans appear intellectually and mechanically inferior and thus best suited for the labor and supply units of the military; that black men and women, too, led the vanguard to eradicate slavery despite the glorification of the white abolitionist; that a black doctor, Dr. Charles Drew, researched and invented the process for blood plasma that today saves millions of lives. And, despite their near-total absence from general textbooks today, African-American artists have been depicting American themes and landscapes in notable works since the mid-eighteenth century.

These examples are only a few among many that must be incorporated into the American tradition if future generations are going to inherit a balanced and objective legacy. Only then will all Americans and the world at large be able to discard intellectually the notion that "everyone and everything of importance in the history of mankind was white" or "everyone from Jesus and the Madonna to Beethoven was black."

During the decade of the 1990's, even the need for a black history month, as a symbol of past negation and distortion, must disappear from the American consciousness as we move toward a timely and united front against the last vestiges of racism, fear, despair, and separatism.