

NEGRO HISTORY... A BASIS

"When the mariner has tossed for many days in thick weather and on an unknown sea, he naturally avails himself of the first pause in the storm, the earliest glance of the sun, to take his latitude, and ascertain how far the elements have taken him from his true course."

"Thus begins Daniel Webster's reply of January, 1830, to South Carolina's Senator Robert Y. Hayne's eloquent defense of the theory of states' rights. In that beginning, Webster noted one of the greatest uses of history.

Allan Nevins, in his *Gateway to History*, observed that "history is actually a bridge connecting the past with the present, and pointing the way to the future." He went on to state that "mankind is always more or less storm driven and history is the sextant of states which, tossed by wind and current, would be lost in confusion if they could not fix their position."

"History enables bewildered bodies of human beings to grasp their relationship with their past, and helps them to chart on general lines their forward course. And it does more than this. By giving people a sense of continuity in all their efforts, red-flagging error, and chronicling immortal worth, it confers on them a consciousness of unity, a realization of the value of individual achievement, and a comprehension of the importance of planned effort as contrasted with aimless drifting."

In the words of Melville J. Herkovits, a race without a history "has no anchor in the present." Such a race can like Robert Frost's "Hired Man," have "nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope."

Many are the people who would deny the American Negro that sextant, that compass, that anchor, that pride, that hope. The Negro has no history, they glibly say. His past begins with slavery. He must ever be the football of today's events. He can look forward to death and death alone.

This is not so!

If there is one tie which binds the American Negro with his cousin in Africa, it is the tie of history. Only recently have scholars begun to show keen interest in the African past. The more they delved, the more they found: Ghana, Melle, Songhay, Ethiopia, Egypt, the Kingdom of the Congo, Zimbabwe, the list is growing—these are becoming more than just names. They are evidences of groups of people developing cultures, political systems, economics, and other characteristics that are understandable even in European terms.

But something happened! WHAT? During the chronological period known in Europe as the late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, there arose in West Africa, along the banks of the Niger River, a kingdom called Songhay. This kingdom had absorbed the peoples, land and cultures of two previous kingdoms, namely Ghana and Melle (sometimes called Mali). It reached its height under the **Sonni Ali** (who died in 1492) and the **Askia** (Usurper) Mohammed, who was deposed in 1542. Then followed a period of internal disorder and decline. But it was an invasion from Morocco by Spanish mercenaries under **Juder** (called by Maurice Delafosse "the scum of Europe"), using gunpowder, then unknown in West Africa, which virtually destroyed Songhay, though the dynasty continued to rule a greatly reduced area until the Twentieth Century. The Battle of Tondibi, 1591, marks a turning point in west African history.

It was the initiation of the European slave trade in the latter half of the Fifteenth Century and its four hundred years of existence which ruined West Africa. What was true of West Africa, was true, though to a lesser extent, of East Africa, but with a more cruel addition. The period of from about 1850 through 1914, saw all the evils of wars and internecine strife, aided and abetted by European powers—particularly England and Germany, and systematic slaughter involving in some cases the complete annihilation of large groups of people. Tricky, broken promises, force—these were some of the means used to subdue East Africa.

Returning to the United States, an entire race—millions! yes, millions—were transplanted here to labor in a strange land. Millions more died dur-

ing the process of transplantation. But, even under these circumstances, the Negro created for himself a place in the history of mankind reminiscent of that of another great people: the ancient Hebrews. There was one difference. The Hebrews did not sing in captivity; the Negroes did. And so, wrote DuBois, "by fateful chance, the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands out today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience from this side of the seas. . . . as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."

Every American of all races should be able to identify Crispus Attucks, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Walter White, Charles S. Johnson, Roy Wilkins, Thurgood Marshall, the list seems endless. North Carolinians should perpetuate the memory of John Chavis, the ante-bellum educator; Lunsford Lane, a cabinet maker of great skill and Abolitionist; George Moses Horton, a poet; and Hugh Cale, who figured prominently in the establishment of the educational institution now known as the Elizabeth City State College.

The Negro has made himself felt not only as the creator of the sorrow songs and through outstanding personages but in practically every walk of American life, at times despite seemingly impossible odds. Everyone should read Margaret Just Butcher's **The Negro in American Culture** along



FREDERICK DOUGLASS — 1817-1875 — STATESMAN



MARTIN LUTHER KING 1929-1968 FREEDOM SEEKER

with Wilbur J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*. A thorough reading of Mrs. Butcher's work, based on the researches of the only American Negro to become a Rhodes Scholar, Alain Locke, should instill in the reader pride in the American Negro. The book reveals that in music (even beyond the folk-song), in literature, in painting, sculpture and architecture, and even in the theater, the influence of the Negro on American life was pervasive, decisive, stimulating; sometimes subtle and seemingly negligent, but omnipresent.

What does all this have to do with the new freedom? Simply this: Knowledge of these and other facts is essential if we are to understand our present and plan our future. Our history has not been without its trials

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CARTER WOODSON—1875-1930

Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and Initiator of Negro History Week, was born December 19, 1875 at New Canton in Buckingham County, Virginia. One of a large and poor family, young Woodson was brought up without the ordinary comforts of life and was not able to attend the district school dur-

ing much of his five-month term because his parents needed him to work the farm. He was able, however, largely by self instruction, to master the fundamentals of common school subjects by the time he was seventeen.

Being ambitious for more education, Carter and his brother Robert Henry moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where they hoped to attend Douglass High School. Forced to earn his living as a miner in the Fayette coal fields, Carter was able to devote only a few months annually to his schooling.

In 1895 Carter, then in his twelfth year, entered Douglass High School in Huntington, West Virginia, where he received his diploma in less than two years. After an equal period of study at Berea College (Kentucky), then famous for its acceptance of both white and colored students, he began teaching at Winona, Fayette County. Four years after his graduation from Douglass High School, Woodson returned as its principal.

In 1903 after completing his college studies in summer vacations, Woodson received his Litt. B. degree from Berea College and took a position as supervisor of schools in the West Virginia. He learned to speak Spanish fluently during his four years there. Still devoting his summers to college studies at the University of



ERNEST E. JUST 1889-1941 SCIENTIST

Chicago from which he received his B. S. degree in 1907 and his M. A. a year later, Woodson later spent a year in Europe and Asia including a semester at La Sorbonne (Paris), where he did graduate work in History and learned to speak French fluently.

After further study at Chicago, Woodson went to Harvard, where he specialized in history and political science. In 1909 he accepted a position as a high school teacher in Washington, D. C. This position enabled him to do research in the Li-



MARY McLEOD BETHUNE 1875-1955 COLLEGE FOUNDER

brary of Congress for a doctoral dissertation, *The Disruption of Virginia*. Presented at Harvard, it won him, in 1912, his Ph. D. degree. Dr. Woodson continued to teach (Continued on Page 5 Col. 2)



HENRY O. TANNER 1859-1937 ARTIST



LANGSTON HUGHES 1902 MAN OF LETTERS