



Dr. Carter G. Woodson

The Father of Black History

"I was privileged to deliver the Eulogy at the Funeral services of Carter Godwin Woodson held at Shiloh Baptist Church in 1950, in Washington. We laid his body to a well-earned rest, while his soul went marching onward [sic] in his writings and his addresses, and in us the heirs of his great endeavors. I drew from his fountain of knowledge. I cherished his memory. I honor his greatness as our historian and erudite precursor."

Rev. Dr. Charles Harris Wesley
"Recollections of Carter G. Woodson"
Journal of Negro History, Vol.83, No.2
Spring, 1998

There are many myths about how Black History Month came into being. The most credible theory comes from the men of [Omega Psi Phi](#), the second oldest African American fraternity in the country. The history section of the fraternity's website says its 1920 Nashville Grand Conclave is the place Dr. Woodson unveiled the program for "National Achievement Week" to promote the study of Negro life and history." Dr. Woodson was a member of Omega Psi Phi and all eight of the original African American fraternities and sororities, over the years, supported him and ASNLH financially and organizationally by spreading the celebration of black history throughout the country by having programs for the masses through their various campuses and communities ([Goggin, 113](#)).

African Americans often ask, "Why did we get the coldest and shortest month of the year to celebrate our history?" It is because Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln were born in February, and Dr. Woodson felt it most appropriate to have what was originally termed "Negro History Week" at this time of year.

It seemed Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson was destined to be the 'Father of Black History Month'. He was a descendent of enslaved Africans who had a taste for liberation even though they were held captive on farms in Virginia. His father and grandfather before him were skilled slaves known to fight their captors

when they felt their cause just. Woodson had a relative who brutally beat his master, ran away, and was eventually captured and whipped so badly there were scars all over his body. After he whipped a white businessman he'd been hired out to, Woodson's father ran away and joined the Union army. His mother was taught to read during slavery and once freed with a family of her own, insisted that her children attend school. It was common for African Americans in the Reconstruction-era rural south to view school as a place their children should attend if there was no work in the fields. Although their parents were sharecroppers after emancipation and their father couldn't read, the four Woodson children still went to school at least four months out of the year ([Goggin, 2-10](#)).

Carter G. Woodson finished high school at the age of 20. He alternately sharecropped with his parents, worked in the coal mines of West Virginia and attended Berea College in Kentucky and the University of Chicago until he graduated in 1903. Woodson's interest in history flowered during this time. He taught school in West Virginia and lived at home with his parents. The elder Woodson enjoyed hearing his son read from popular newspapers. In turn, the younger Woodson would go to his father's job on the railways and hear plenty of stories from Civil War Veterans ([Goggin, 12-16](#)).

When the Philippines became an American protectorate in 1898, the War Department recruited teachers and other professionals to develop the island's infrastructure. Woodson taught there from 1903 to 1906, reaching the post of Supervisor of Schools in one of the island's provinces. He came back to the United States to visit his family and upon his return became too ill to go back to the Philippines. Illness didn't stop his thirst for knowledge, and once he was on his feet again he made a tour of the world visiting everywhere from Malaysia to France. He came home and was accepted to the University of Chicago to do graduate work in American history and completed his degree program in 1908. Harvard University was Woodson's next stop, and the extreme racism in academia at the beginning of the century prepared him for the intellectual battles he would encounter in his profession later in life. In 1912, Woodson became the first African American of slave parentage to earn his PhD from Harvard University ([Goggin, 20 -25](#)).

Carter Godwin Woodson was said to be protective, headstrong, exact and uncompromising in regards to his organization the [Association for the Study of Negro Life and History](#) (ASNLH) and in all matters concerning the history of his race ([Wesley, 146 -148](#)). The roots of ASNLH began at the black YMCA in Chicago during the 1915 Exposition of Negro Progress. Some of the foremost African American thinkers in the country were on hand to celebrate the 50th anniversary of emancipation. During informal nightly discussions, which took place at the YMCA after the days of conferencing, a select group of attendees expressed a need for a Negro history think tank. By September, some of the original participants of the June moonlight meetings were back in Chicago attending the founding meeting of ASNLH ([Goggin, 32-34](#)).

The Journal of Negro History and [Education of the Negro Prior to 1861](#) were the first scholarly products to come out of the newly formed association. The first copy of the *Journal* featured Tuskegee historian, Dr. Nathan Monroe Work's article on *The Passing Tradition and Negro Civilization* and a review of the book [Education of the Negro](#) by African American suffragette and clubwoman Mary Church Terrell (Vol. 1, No., 1, 1916). Woodson funded the printing of the first volume with his own money ([Goggin, 35](#)). Gradually he and his board began to raise money from a wide range of sources that would include

African American educators, white philanthropists like Julius Rosenwald, and funding organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation ([Goggin, 73, 55 -58](#)). Woodson was very successful raising money from the everyday African American who was proud to be a part of something that celebrated their past. He received his heaviest popular support for the *Negro History Bulletin* which ASNLH began publishing in 1930. Churches, schools and social organizations subscribed to the *Bulletin* because it was designed to appeal to them. In *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History*, historian Jacqueline Goggin said Woodson filled the *Bulletin* with photographs and highlighted sections. "Persons and Achievements to be Remembered" was a calendar of birthdays of important blacks and significant dates in black history." A "Children's Page", "School News," and "Questions for Study" all helped laymen historians navigate the new field of black studies ([Goggin, 113 -116](#)).

Woodson also created Associated Publishers for writers whose interests focused on Africana studies. African American historians who struggled to have their work published by mainstream publishing houses because of cost or racism found a home with Woodson. His standards were high and only manuscripts that offered a thorough analysis of their subject areas were accepted ([Goggin, 55 -56](#)). Many famous writers, historians and folklorists honed their craft at the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Langston Hughes alphabetized the lists of *Free African Americans for Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830*. Zora Neale Hurston collected African American folklore and interviewed former enslaved Africans for the association ([Goggin, 69,72](#)). In 1939 Woodson reviewed Hurston's book, [Tell My Horse](#) in the *Journal of Negro History* (Vol. 24, No. 1, 1939).

What was most significant about the ASNLH is the number of black historians who rose from its ranks. The dashing African Methodist Episcopal Church elder and former president of Wilberforce and Central State Universities, [Dr. Charles Harris Wesley](#) could be counted in the ASNLH number even though Woodson had given him grief once concerning a book he and Lorenzo Greene composed documenting the history of the black church ([Wesley, 147](#)). After Dr. Woodson passed away, Wesley lead the association until his death ([Aptheker, 155 -156](#) [Harris, 155 -156](#)).

[Alruthus Ambush Taylor](#) was a dean at Fisk University and was the first full-time investigator for the association. His skills as a mathematician lent themselves well to the work of ASNLH ([Franklin, 240 -242](#)).

Lorenzo Johnston Greene worked with and for Dr. Woodson as an investigator and a salesman. Greene was a Howard and Columbia University graduate who traveled through the south and southeast with four Howard students selling the Associated Publisher's books. In *Selling Black History for Carter G. Woodson: A Diary 1930 -1933*, Greene, who eventually became a professor at Lincoln University in Missouri, writes about his years working for the association and about being mentored by Woodson.

Dr. Woodson was a tireless advocate of what today we call Black Studies. He believed history, in the hands of the African American general public, provided a balm that politics and academia failed to achieve. Paying homage to Woodson in a *Journal of Negro History* article, Rev. Wesley explained, "Woodson once said, 'The Association makes a sharp distinction between the study of the Negro and the agitation of the race problem' ([Wesley, 147](#)). He kept memberships in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League even though he wasn't very on cordial terms with Dr. W. E. B. Dubois ([Wesley, 146](#) and [Goggin, 127](#)). He admired and worked with Asa Philip Randolph, leader of the movement to unionize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and spoke

positively of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, back-to-Africa and pan-Africanist leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, for his efforts organizing grass-roots people and for promoting race pride (Goggin, 150 -153).

Carter Woodson was serious about maintaining ASNLH's autonomy. When philanthropists and scholarly funding organizations wanted him to align the association with one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) or political groups such as the NAACP, he remained steadfast in his belief that sincere and pure research about the race could only be done by a stand-alone institution, his institution, and it remains a leading scholarly think tank today.

The 89th National Conference of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2004 and the 90th gathering of African American historians will take place in Buffalo, New York in October, 2005.

Bibliography

- See [Omega Psi Phi Fraternity's](#) history page
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