

# Woodson



Carter Godwin Woodson was born on December 19, 1875, in New Canton, Virginia. His parents, James Henry Woodson and Eliza Woodson, were former slaves who became independent farmers. Carter was the oldest of their nine children and to help his family he had to work in the fields instead of attending school. He nevertheless learned the basics of math and English with the help of his mother and two of his uncles. At the age of 20, in 1895, Woodson moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where he was able to enroll in Douglass High School. There, he worked in coal mines while completing in just two years the courses required to graduate. He later continued his education by enrolling in Berea College in Kentucky and again graduated, in 1903, after only two years. He returned to Douglass High School where he served for a time as the principal. Accepting a position with the U.S. War Department, Woodson became supervisor of a school in the Philippines. He traveled extensively through Africa, Asia, and Europe, studying for a semester at France's famed Sorbonne University. Returning to the United

States, he enrolled in the University of Chicago and graduated from there in 1908 with a master's degree in European history. At the same time he began teaching at Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., Woodson also enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University. He received his doctorate in 1912.

Although he lacked a formal elementary school education, Carter G. Woodson became one of the most respected scholars of his era and to this day is recognized as "the father of black history."

Woodson published the first of his major contributions to the study of African Americans, *Study of Negro Life and the Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, in 1915. In Chicago during the same year, he founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life. The establishment of the organization was an important step away from treating African Americans as nothing more than folk characters in general American history. It provided Woodson and others with a tool for researching and documenting the greater contributions of peoples of African descent to humanity as a whole. In 1916, Woodson started the *Journal of Negro History* to create a record of his organization's findings and stimulate further interest in the study of African-American history.

From 1920 to 1922, Woodson served as a dean at West Virginia State College. He also at that time established Associated Publishers, now one of the oldest black publishing companies in the United States. Associated Publishers was founded to provide an outlet for scholarly works on African-American history, many of which Woodson continued to write himself. He published one of his most widely used college texts, *The Negro in Our History*, in 1922.

On February 7, 1926, Woodson established Negro History Week. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recognized the significance of the event by awarding Woodson the Spingarn Medal. Among his most enduring and celebrated legacies, Negro History Week was founded specifically to recognize, honor, and encourage the achievements of African Americans. Woodson assigned a theme for each annual observation and issued information packets highlighting the historical contributions of blacks. Negro History Week activities were expanded to a month during the 1960s and in 1976, as part of the U.S. bicentennial celebrations, officially became Black History Month. The annual observance provided a major tool and platform in the struggle to have African-American studies included in high school and college curriculums throughout the United States. Moreover, it encouraged other social groups in America to proclaim and celebrate their contributions to the world in such observances as Women's History Month, Hispanic History Month, Gay Pride Month, and others.

Woodson enlisted the aid of Howard University graduate Lorenzo Greene from 1930 to 1933 to help develop a market for his published works and oversee their distribution. With the help of several students, Greene traveled throughout the South, Southwest, and Midwest to distribute Woodson's works and promote the preservation of

black history. His efforts also provided funds for the Association for the Study of Negro Life, which generally depended on Woodson's salary and donations from interested blacks for its operating expenses. Greene maintained a diary of his experiences and later published it.

Woodson continued to expand the body of works on African-American history with the publication of numerous titles, including: *The Mis-Education of the Negro* in 1933; *The African Background Outlined* in 1936; and *African Heroes and Heroines* in 1939.

Woodson maintained that he was married to his work and toward that end remained dedicated to it until his death on April 3, 1950, in Washington, D.C. His home is listed as a National Historic Landmark and Chicago's Carter G. Woodson Regional Library is named in his honor.

## References and Further Information

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