

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) – The Origin of Black History Month

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), now the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, was organized in Chicago by Dr. Carter G. Woodson on September 9, 1915. In attendance at the meeting were George Cleveland Hall, W. B. Hartgrove, and J. E. Stamps. The purpose of the organization, according to Dr. Woodson, was to collect sociological and historical data on the Negro, to study the peoples of African ancestry, to publish books in the field, and to promote harmony between the races by acquainting one with the achievements of the other.

In January 1916, four months after the founding of the association, Dr. Woodson began to publish the *Journal of Negro History*, and in 1937 he inaugurated the popular magazine the *Negro History Bulletin*. For a number of years, Mary McLeod Bethune (both as a member of ASNLH and as president) had encouraged Woodson to devise new ways to reach primary and secondary school teachers, children, and the masses of African Americans; the *Negro History Bulletin* was designed to accomplish this end. Following the publication of the first edition of the *Journal of Negro History*, scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, Frederick Jackson Turner, F. W. Shepardson, Oswald Garrison Villard, and major newspapers such as the *New York Evening Post*, the *Boston Herald*, and the *Southern Workman*, were enthusiastic in their praise of the *Journal*. The *Boston Herald* concluded in its comments: "Hitherto, the history of the Negro race has been written chiefly by white men; now the educated Negroes of this country have decided to search and tell the historic achievements of their race in their own way and from their own point of view. Judging from the first issue of their publication, they are going to do it in a way that will measure up to the standards set by the best historical publications of the day."

In 1940, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the association, Professor W. B. Hesseltine of the University of Wisconsin concluded that the association had made a major contribution to scientific history in two respects. By doing scholarly research on the Negro, the association had prompted a reconsideration and a consequent revision of the older concepts of the Negro's role in American history and furnished an example of the interrelationship between history and sociology. The first enriched the content of American history and the second improved the methods of scientific research. Recognizing the difficulties faced by black scholars in getting their work published, Carter Woodson organized Associated Publishers in 1920 as the publishing arm of the association. Dr. Charles Wesley, coauthor with Dr. Woodson of *The Negro in Our History* (1992), quotes Woodson as saying that "The Negro faces ... a stone wall when he presents scientific productions to the publishing houses. If the Negro is to settle down to publishing merely what others permit him to bring out, the world will never know what the race has thought and felt and attempted and accomplished and the story of the Negro will perish with him."

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In February 1926, Dr. Woodson inaugurated Negro **History** Week, to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. This celebration enlarged the scope of Woodson's work beyond the circle of scholars to school systems and school curricula. The observance of Negro **History** Week led to the demand for books, literature, and pictures on the Negro. In 1976, in honor of the nation's bicentennial observance, the week was expanded to National **Black History Month**. The association, through Associated Publishers, continues to establish the theme for each year's celebration.

Since the association's founding, women have played a significant role in virtually every aspect of the organization. Two women, Mary McLeod Bethune (1936–51) as president and Lorraine Williams (1974–76) as editor, worked at the *Journal of Negro **History***—the only women who have served in these positions. During Lorraine Williams's years as editor, the editorial board became more reflective of women and younger scholars. Women have served as vice president (Jeannette Cascone and Darlene Clark Hine), secretary (Janet Sims-Wood), and treasurer (Janette Hoston Harris and Mauree Ayton) of the organization, on its executive council, and on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Negro **History*** and the *Negro **History** Bulletin*. Lucy Harth-Smith, a school principal from Lexington, Kentucky, was the first woman named to the executive council, in 1935. Later, Wilhelmina Crosson, Vivian Cook, and Edith Ingraham served on the council.

For a number of years, Lois Mailou Jones, the well-known artist, illustrated books for Associated Publishers, and Dorothy Porter Wesley lent her considerable skills as an author and archivist to numerous activities of the association, including working with the Committee for the *Encyclopedia Africana*. W. Leona Miles, after more than forty-five years at the association in a variety of positions, oversees the affairs of Associated Publishers as managing director.

Women also have been represented as authors and as subjects in the *Journal of Negro **History***. As of 1950, more articles by women authors had appeared in the *Journal of Negro **History*** than in any other historical journal. During the twenty years from 1958 to 1978, 12 percent of the articles in the *Journal of Negro **History*** were contributed by women. Among the **black** women represented were Merze Tate, Bettye Gardner, Bettye Collier-Thomas, and Martha Cobb.

The Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and **History** continues the work begun by Carter G. Woodson, with **Black History Month**, an annual convention, and two Ford Foundation–funded projects.