

One History – Many Perspectives

Imagine a timeline of U.S. History with its numerous tick marks indicating the passage of time and captions that indicate special events interspersed throughout its length. Many of these captions would highlight historical events and summarize their impact on our nation. Some captions might depict national tragedies and national achievements, while others focus on our national heroes. This record of our past is vital to the preservation of our common American Heritage, but it only offers a myopic view of our complex history. Publishers routinely censored information that was considered politically or socially objectionable, and given the fact that race relations in the U.S. have ranged from tenuous to tepid for over three and a half centuries; one can only imagine how much more of our history has yet to be discovered. Imagine that same timeline with the year 1492 anchoring the left side and 2006 punctuating the right side, but now expand your mental picture of this imaginary timeline, adding width and depth. The width of this timeline represents the unique perspectives of every individual or group present during those same highlighted events. The amount of information about a particular event would add depth to the line. The result more accurately represents U.S. History and is monolithic proportions and better characterizes the relationship between the people of this nation and past events.

A great man once said, “Learning to accept insult, to compromise on principle, to mislead your fellow man, or to betray your people, is to lose your soul.” His advice was a source of inspiration for his son, Carter, who was entering school for the first time at age 20. Carter went to school intermittently while he worked as a coal miner to help support the family, but managed to graduate from high school in less than two years. Over the next several years, Carter’s reverence for education most likely guided him into a teaching career which began in the high school from which he graduated in Huntington, West Virginia. After receiving his Bachelor of Literature degree from Berea College in Kentucky, Carter taught and studied in Europe and Asia and upon his return to the U.S., he completed his formal education, earning a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in history from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. Those insightful words of advice came from his father, James Henry Woodson, a freed slave who could neither read nor write, but his proverbial wisdom provided the motivation that would propel his son, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, to a level of academic prominence that was all but unimaginable for a black man in the early 1900’s. Dr. Woodson went on to write numerous books and articles that focused on the achievements and contributions of Black people throughout American history. He founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and was responsible for the development of Negro History Week, which has evolved into what we now recognize as Black History Month.

Dr. Woodson believed that the contributions of Black Americans are a legitimate and integral part of the history of this country and that actual historical accounts of events involving Blacks, as told by Blacks, are more compelling than reinterpretations. He authored numerous works, most of which sought to disprove the denigrating stereotypes that have been cast upon African Americans, but the true value of his mission to document and make public the experiences and achievements of Black Americans is captured in a quote by Mary McLeod Bethune when she asserted that “With the power of cumulative fact, he moved back the barriers and broadened our vision of the world, and the world's vision of us.” Black History is significant to all Americans, as it enhances our collection of facts, broadens our view of historical events and enables us to

make inferences about the past that result from asking who, what, where, when and most importantly why and how. The unique perspectives of the people of our nation add dimension to our History. Black History Month celebrates the truth about our American heritage: that there has never been an era, event, profession, tragedy, nor triumph that has not included people of African descent.