

**Carter Godwin Woodson** (December 19, 1875 – April 3, 1950)<sup>[1]</sup> was an American historian, author, journalist and the founder of the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History](#). He was one of the first scholars to study [African-American history](#). A founder of [The Journal of Negro History](#) in 1916, Woodson has been cited as the "[father of black history](#)".<sup>[2]</sup> In February 1926 he launched the celebration of "Negro History Week", the precursor of [Black History Month](#).<sup>[3]</sup>

Carter G. Woodson was born in Buckingham County, Virginia<sup>[4]</sup> on December 19, 1875, the son of former slaves, James and Eliza Riddle Woodson.<sup>[5]</sup> His father helped [Union](#) soldiers during the [Civil War](#) and moved his family to [West Virginia](#) when he heard that [Huntington](#) was building a high school for blacks.

Coming from a large, poor family, Carter Woodson could not regularly attend school. Through self-instruction, he mastered the fundamentals of common school subjects by the age of 17. Wanting more education, he went to [Fayette County](#) to earn a living as a miner in the coal fields, and was able to devote only a few months each year to his schooling.

In 1895, at the age of 20, Woodson entered [Douglass High School](#), where he received his diploma in less than two years.<sup>[6]</sup> From 1897 to 1900, Woodson taught at [Winona](#) in Fayette County. In 1900 he was selected as the principal of Douglass High School. He earned his Bachelor of Literature degree from [Berea College](#) in [Kentucky](#) in 1903 by taking classes part-time between 1901 and 1903. From 1903 to 1907, Woodson was a school supervisor in the [Philippines](#).

Woodson later attended the [University of Chicago](#), where he was awarded an A.B. and A.M. in 1908. He was a member of the first black professional fraternity [Sigma Pi Phi](#)<sup>[7]</sup> and a member of [Omega Psi Phi](#). He completed his PhD in history at [Harvard University](#) in 1912, where he was the second African American (after [W. E. B. Du Bois](#)) to earn a doctorate.<sup>[8]</sup> His doctoral dissertation, *The Disruption of Virginia*, was based on research he did at the [Library of Congress](#) while teaching high school in Washington, D.C. After earning the doctoral degree, he continued teaching in public schools, later joining the faculty at [Howard University](#) as a professor, and served there as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

## Career

Convinced that the role of his own people in American history and in the history of other cultures was being ignored or misrepresented among scholars, Woodson realized the need for research into the neglected past of African Americans. Along with William D. Hartgrove, George Cleveland Hall, Alexander L. Jackson, and James E. Stamps, he founded the [Association for the Study of Negro Life and History](#) on September 9, 1915, in [Chicago](#).<sup>[9]</sup> That was the year Woodson published *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. His other books followed: *A Century of Negro Migration* (1918) and *The History of the Negro Church* (1927). His work *The Negro in Our History* has been reprinted in numerous editions and was revised by [Charles H. Wesley](#) after Woodson's death in 1950.

In January 1916, Woodson began publication of the scholarly [Journal of Negro History](#). It has never missed an issue, despite the [Great Depression](#), loss of support from foundations, and two World Wars. In 2002, it was renamed the [Journal of African American History](#) and continues to be published by the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History](#) (ASALH).

Woodson stayed at the [Wabash Avenue YMCA](#) during visits to [Chicago](#). His experiences at the Y and in the surrounding [Bronzeville](#) neighborhood inspired him to create the [Association for the Study of Negro Life and History](#) in 1915. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History), which ran conferences, published [The Journal of Negro History](#), and "particularly targeted those responsible for the education of black children".<sup>[10]</sup> Another inspiration was [John Wesley Cromwell](#)'s 1914 book, *The Negro in American History: Men and Women Eminent in the Evolution of the American of African Descent*.<sup>[11]</sup>

Woodson believed that education and increasing social and professional contacts among blacks and whites could reduce racism and he promoted the organized study of African-American history partly for that purpose. He would later promote the first Negro History Week in Washington, D.C., in 1926, forerunner of Black History Month.<sup>[12]</sup> The Bronzeville neighborhood declined during the late 1960s and 1970s like many other [inner-city](#) neighborhoods across the country, and the Wabash Avenue YMCA was forced to close during the 1970s, until being restored in 1992 by The Renaissance Collaborative.<sup>[13]</sup>

He served as Academic Dean of the [West Virginia Collegiate Institute](#), now West Virginia State University, from 1920 to 1922.<sup>[14]</sup>

He studied many aspects of African-American history. For instance, in 1924, he published the first survey of free black slaveowners in the United States in 1830.<sup>[15]</sup>

He once wrote: "If you can control a man's thinking, you don't have to worry about his actions. If you can determine what a man thinks you do not have to worry about what he will do. If you can make a man believe that he is inferior, you don't have to compel him to seek an inferior status, he will do so without being told and if you can make a man believe that he is justly an outcast, you don't have to order him to the back door, he will go to the back door on his own and if there is no back door, the very nature of the man will demand that you build one."

Woodson became affiliated with the Washington, D.C. branch of the [NAACP](#), and its chairman [Archibald Grimké](#). On January 28, 1915, Woodson wrote a letter to Grimké expressing his dissatisfaction with activities and making two proposals:

1. That the branch secure an office for a center to which persons may report whatever concerns the black race may have, and from which the Association may extend its operations into every part of the city; and
2. That a canvasser be appointed to enlist members and obtain subscriptions for [The Crisis](#), the NAACP magazine edited by [W. E. B. Du Bois](#).

Du Bois added the proposal to divert "patronage from business establishments which do not treat races alike," that is, boycott businesses. Woodson wrote that he would cooperate as one of the twenty-five effective canvassers, adding that he would pay the office rent for one month. Grimké did not welcome Woodson's ideas. <sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Responding to Grimké's comments about his proposals, on March 18, 1915, Woodson wrote:

"I am not afraid of being sued by white businessmen. In fact, I should welcome such a law suit. It would do the cause much good. Let us banish fear. We have been in this mental state for three centuries. I am a radical. I am ready to act, if I can find brave men to help me."<sup>[16]</sup>

His difference of opinion with Grimké, who wanted a more conservative course, contributed to Woodson's ending his affiliation with the NAACP. <sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Black History Month

Woodson devoted the rest of his life to historical research. He worked to preserve the history of African Americans and accumulated a collection of thousands of artifacts and publications. He noted that African-American contributions "were overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and the teachers who use them."<sup>[17]</sup> Race prejudice, he concluded, "is merely the logical result of tradition, the inevitable outcome of thorough instruction to the effect that the Negro has never contributed anything to the progress of mankind."<sup>[17]</sup>

In 1926, Woodson pioneered the celebration of "Negro History Week",<sup>[18]</sup> designated for the second week in February, to coincide with marking the birthdays of [Abraham Lincoln](#) and [Frederick Douglass](#).<sup>[19]</sup> However, it was the Black United Students and Black educators at [Kent State University](#) that founded [Black History Month](#), on February 1, 1970.<sup>[20]</sup> Six years later Black History Month was being celebrated all across the country in educational institutions, centers of Black culture and community centers, both great and small, when President [Gerald Ford](#) recognized Black History Month, during the celebration of the [United States Bicentennial](#). He urged Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history."<sup>[21]</sup>

Woodson believed in self-reliance and racial respect, values he shared with [Marcus Garvey](#), a [Jamaican](#) activist who worked in New York. Woodson became a regular columnist for Garvey's weekly [Negro World](#).

Woodson's political activism placed him at the center of a circle of many black intellectuals and activists from the 1920s to the 1940s. He corresponded with [W. E. B. Du Bois](#), [John E. Bruce](#), [Arturo Alfonso Schomburg](#), [Hubert H. Harrison](#), and [T. Thomas Fortune](#), among others. Even with the extended duties of the Association, Woodson made time to write academic works such as *The History of the Negro Church* (1922), *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), and others which continue to have wide readership.

Woodson did not shy away from controversial subjects, and used the pages of *Black World* to contribute to debates. One issue related to West Indian/African-American relations. He summarized that "the West Indian Negro is free", and observed that West Indian societies had been more successful at properly dedicating the necessary amounts of time and resources needed to educate and genuinely emancipate people. Woodson approved of efforts by West Indians to include materials related to Black history and culture into their school curricula.

Woodson was ostracized by some of his contemporaries because of his insistence on defining a category of history related to ethnic culture and race. At the time, these educators felt that it was wrong to teach or understand African-American history as separate from more general American history. According to these educators, "Negroes" were simply Americans, darker skinned, but with no history apart from that of any other. Thus Woodson's efforts to get Black culture and history into the curricula of institutions, even historically Black colleges, were often unsuccessful. Today African-American studies have become specialized fields of study in history, music, culture, literature and other areas; in addition, there is more emphasis on African-American contributions to general American culture. The United States government celebrates Black History Month.

## Death and legacy

Woodson died suddenly from a heart attack in the office within his [home](#) in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C., on April 3, 1950, at the age of 74. He is buried at Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in [Suitland, Maryland](#).

The time that schools have set aside each year to focus on African-American history is Woodson's most visible legacy. His determination to further the recognition of the Negro in American and world history, however, inspired countless other scholars. Woodson remained focused on his work throughout his life. Many see him as a man of vision and understanding. Although Woodson was among the ranks of the educated few, he did not feel particularly sentimental about elite educational institutions. <sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> The Association and journal that he started are still operating, and both have earned intellectual respect.

Woodson's other far-reaching activities included the founding in 1920 of the Associated Publishers, the oldest African-American publishing company in the United States. This enabled publication of books concerning blacks that might not have been supported in the rest of the market. He founded Negro History Week in 1926 (now known as Black History Month). He created the *Negro History Bulletin*, developed for teachers in elementary and high school grades, and published continuously since 1937. Woodson also influenced the Association's direction and subsidizing of research in African-American history. He wrote numerous articles, monographs and books on Blacks. *The Negro in Our History* reached its 11th edition in 1966, when it had sold more than 90,000 copies.

[Dorothy Porter Wesley](#) recalled: "Woodson would wrap up his publications, take them to the post office and have dinner at the YMCA. He would teasingly decline her dinner

invitations saying, 'No, you are trying to marry me off. I am married to my work'".<sup>[22]</sup> Woodson's most cherished ambition, a six-volume *Encyclopedia Africana*, lay incomplete at the time of his death.

## Honors and tributes

- In 1926, Woodson received the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Spingarn Medal](#).
- The [Carter G. Woodson Book Award](#) was established in 1974 "for the most distinguished social science books appropriate for young readers that depict ethnicity in the United States."<sup>[23]</sup>
- The [U.S. Postal Service](#) issued a 20-cent stamp honoring Woodson in 1984.<sup>[24]</sup>
- In 1992, the [Library of Congress](#) held an exhibition entitled *Moving Back Barriers: The Legacy of Carter G. Woodson*. Woodson had donated his collection of 5,000 items from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries to the Library.
- His Washington, D.C. home has been preserved and designated the [Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site](#).
- In 2002, scholar [Molefi Kete Asante](#) named Carter G. Woodson on his list of [100 Greatest African Americans](#).<sup>[25]</sup>
- On February 1st, 2018, he was honored with a [Google Doodle](#).<sup>[26]</sup>

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