

THE LEGACY OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

The monthlong celebration of Black history has a [history](#) of its own.

In 1915, 50 years after passage of the 13th Amendment (which abolished slavery in the U.S.) the state of Illinois held an emancipation anniversary celebration. Among thousands of Black attendees from across the country, Harvard-educated historian Carter G. Woodson [displayed](#) an exhibit focusing on Black history. In September 1916, Woodson and minister Jesse E. Moorland took those efforts one step further, founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), aimed at studying and promoting the achievements of Black Americans and other people of African descent. The group still exists today and is known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).

In 1926, the group sponsored the first Negro History Week during the second week in February. They chose this week because it coincided with the birthdays of both President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Following this first observance, mayors across the country began recognizing Negro History Week each year.

In the 1960s, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement brought an increased awareness of and pride in Black identity, prompting universities across the country to extend the observance and led to the creation of Black History Month.

The monthlong observance became officially recognized in 1976 when President Gerald Ford called upon Americans to, “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.”

To help celebrate Black history, each year since 1928 the ASALH has also [assigned a theme](#) to the yearly observances. 2020 was “African Americans and the Black Vote” in honor of the 150-year anniversary of the 15th Amendment which granted Black men the right to vote and the 100-year anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

2021’s theme is “The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity.” According to the ASALH, “The Black family has been a topic of study in many disciplines — history, literature, the visual arts and film studies, sociology, anthropology and social policy. Its representation, identity and diversity have been revered, stereotyped and vilified from the days of slavery to our own time. The Black family knows no single location, since family reunions and genetic-ancestry searches testify to the spread of family members across states, nations and continents.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

- What do you already know about Black history? What about the establishment of Black History Month did you not previously know?
- Why is it important to have nationally recognized celebrations of heritage? How do they contribute to cultural awareness and pride?



Carter G. Woodson (Public Domain image)