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Out of the Attic

The founder of Virginia's Black History Month

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Image: Carter G. Woodson, Ph.D, circa 1915. (NMAH-Smithsonian Institution)

What is now Black History Month started as Negro History Week in 1926 at the urging of Carter G. Woodson, Ph.D. At the time, Woodson was a professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., but his story started in Virginia.

Woodson was born in 1875 in Buckingham County to parents who were formerly enslaved. Economic conditions required Woodson to work with his father in the coal mines of West Virginia while still a teenager. The majority of his education was self-taught, and he was not able to enter high school until the age of 20.

After finishing high school in two years, Woodson worked as a teacher and school principal while earning his bachelor's degree at Berea College in Kentucky. After graduating, he did a stint as a school supervisor in the Philippines. In 1912, he became only the second African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, following in the footsteps of W.E.B. DuBois.

Though some universities refused to hire him, Woodson served as dean of the School of Liberal Arts and the head of the graduate faculty at Howard in 1919 and 1920.

Before his time at Howard University, Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915. Today, that organization is known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Woodson also founded the organization's publication *The Journal of Negro History*, which is now *The Journal of African American History*.

Woodson's lasting impact on the study of American history had an inauspicious start. Despite being a dues-paying member of the American Historical Association, the organization banned him from their conferences based on the color of his skin. This led him to a realization that African American history





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

was, as he described, “overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and the teachers who use them.”

His solution in 1926 was the founding of Negro History Week, encompassing the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The tradition expanded to Black History Month, which was officially recognized by President Gerald Ford in 1976.

Carter G. Woodson died of a heart attack in 1950 at the age of 74. His residence on 9th St. NW in Washington, D.C. is now a National Historic Site. His legacy expands much further than the house. In 1981, the University of Virginia opened the Carter G. Woodson Institute for the Study of African American and African Studies. It is an appropriate memorial to the Virginia-born “Father of Black History Month.”

Historic Alexandria celebrates Black History Month throughout the month of February. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.