

## OVERVIEW & HISTORY

Since 1976, every US President has designated and celebrated February as Black History Month in order to coincide with President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass' birthdays, both of which fall in February. Abraham Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation in 1863 while Frederick Douglass (formerly enslaved) became a key activist, author and leader of the abolitionist movement, across the country. Accordingly, this month was already a time when many Black people were holding celebrations in honor of the emancipation of slaves.

The origin of date commemorating the contributions of Black people to the development and success of this country began in 1926 with the celebration of Negro Week. Between 1926 and 1976, the second week in February was celebrated as Negro History Week. This celebration started and was sponsored by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) as well as their then president Carter G. Woodson. This week inspired schools, community groups, and people in general all over the country to host events and organize around the celebration and study of Black history, overall working to gain consciousness and understanding of the Black experience in America, which was Woodson's goal. Thanks in large part to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's; there was a strong growth in awareness of Black identity and the Black community, leading to the switch from Negro History Week to Black History Month. That change took place in 1976 when for the first time President Gerald Ford designated the month of February, Black History Month.

Black History Month is a time to educate ourselves about the history of Black people in America. We must be careful however, since Black History is American History. While the history of America involves racism manifested by the continued systemic oppression, the loss of familial and cultural capital and the disenfranchisement of people in the Black community, it is also made up of acts of resistance, success and brilliance. This month therefore is a time to recognize the dark moments of our country while simultaneously celebrating the resilience and creativity of so many who had been oppressed.



Black History month is a celebration, but it is also a call to action, and this has rung true for leaders throughout history, since its inception as a holiday in 1926. It's a time to acknowledge and dive deeply into the dark history of our country and its mistreatment of Black Americans, and how that history continues in new ways today. A time to celebrate all people that organized, that defied systemic odds and oppressions simply by being alive and thriving in the face of that oppression. In the words of Barack Obama (2016), "it's about the lived experiences of all African Americans...and how those experiences have shaped and challenged and ultimately strengthened America".

The daily lives of all Americans are impacted by Black Americans and their accomplishments. From Garrett Morgan who invented the traffic light to Lewis Latimer who contributed to the telephone and light bulb to Maya Angelou who has influenced American literature and to Gladys West whose mathematical expertise created the foundation for the global positioning systems (GPS) we use daily. One area in which Black Americans have found a tremendous platform for excellence and social change is the realm of sports. Multiple athletes have excelled in their sport becoming champions and some of the best to ever. While receiving acknowledgement and fame for their efforts they have simultaneously challenged and exposed the discriminatory systems to other Black Americans and Americans generally. These brave athletes sacrifice so much in their careers to derail the status quo. Athletes like Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and more recently, LeBron James, Venus and Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Maya Moore have used their platforms masterfully to create change.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Engage with friends and family in discussions of Black history in America and common misconceptions. For example:
  - "Did you know that enslaved Africans were brought to the shores of America as early as 1619?"
  - "Do you know why The One Drop Rule was passed?"
  - "Did you know that it took roughly 2 years for all enslaved people to be freed after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation?"
  - "Do you know the ways in which segregation laws have influenced our laws today?"
- Be critical of the history of oppression against Black people the United States has partaken in, and discuss how the system was built. For example:
  - "Can we create a system of freedom and equality in a system that was built with enslavement of Black people as the main source of profit?"
  - "Are current laws being passed helpful for the advancement of all communities or do they perpetuate similar structures as during slavery & Jim Crow?"
  - "Why do you think people separate Black history from American history?"
- Celebrate the contributions of Black people in America by engaging with and discussing them with others. For example:
  - Read a book or excerpt by a Black author and discuss things you learned with people more knowledgeable on the subject than you.
  - Listen to music by Black artists from different eras in history and research how it relates to the political state of the country at the time.

- Listen to speeches given by Black leaders and discuss what you learned, things that struck you deeply, and why you think those speeches were so impactful at that moment in history.
- Watch documentaries or films about Black leaders or the Civil Rights Movement as a whole, and discuss what you learned or misconceptions you had that the film shed light on. Dive into why you think you had that misconception.

## Action Steps

- Explore the Black experience in America by reading books and watching films, documentaries, and videos and listening to music by Black artists.
- Discuss the things you read, listen to, or watch regarding the Black experience with others and do not be afraid to ask difficult questions.
- Encourage and participate in cross-cultural and cross-generational dialogue to better understand the different experiences of Black people in America throughout history and how it has impacted them and their communities.
- Encourage your local, state, and federal officials to vote in favor of policies that combat systemic racism, promote equity, and remove violence, discrimination and oppression against the Black community from our system.
- Critically reflect on your own community, place of work/school, and neighborhood. Ask yourself if it is reflective of the demographics of the rest of the country, and why that may or may not be the case.
- Shop at Black-owned stores and businesses.
- Participate in protests, marches and other organizing efforts in support of the Black community.

## WEBSITES

- [Association for the Study of African American Life and History \(ASALH\)](#)
- [NAACP](#)
- [Black History Month](#)

## Videos / Films

- [Kids Explain Black History Month by Global Citizen](#)
- [Why is February Black History Month? Who Came Up With This Idea? By Let's TEACH](#)
- [Selma \(Film\)](#)
- [13th \(Film\)](#)
- [John Lewis: Good Trouble \(Film\)](#)

## Readings

- [Black History Month by History.com](#)
- [Here's the Story Behind Black History Month and Why it's Celebrated in February by NPR](#)
- [You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays by Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Genevieve West](#)
- [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou](#)
- [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michele Alexander](#)
- [The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson](#)
- [The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin](#)