

## *The More You Know: Dr. Carter G. Woodson*

By Deborrah M. Wilkinson, submitted on January 20, 2026

Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, known as, "the Father of Black History," was born in 1875 on a small farm in New Canton, VA. His illiterate parents were former slaves. As a young boy he worked on the family farm. When they moved to West Virginia, he worked in coal mines as a teen helping to supplement his father's meager income.

Carter was largely self-taught and had mastered a few common subjects by 17-years-old. He entered high school at 20; receiving a diploma in less than two years. Woodson worked as a teacher and a school principal then obtained a bachelor's degree in literature with honors from Berea College in Kentucky.

After graduating he accepted a position as a school supervisor in the Philippines. Later on, opportunities afforded traveled throughout Europe and Asia. Carter earned a master's degree in European History in 1908 from the University of Chicago.

Receiving a PhD in History in 1912 gave him the distinction of being the second Black American, after W.E.B. Du Bois, awarded from Harvard University. In addition, Dr. Woodson, is the only graduate of slave parentage, and the first professionally trained historian of African descent.

As a dues-paying member of the prestigious American Historical Association, Dr. Woodson was barred from attending conferences. The white-dominated profession had little interest in Black history. Innumerable contributions by African-Americans were "overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and teachers who used them."

Dr. Woodson recognized the critical need for a separate institutional structure where Black scholars could study and preserve Black history. In 1915, with funding from several philanthropic foundations he established, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Chicago.

The following year, he started publishing the scholarly, *Journal of Negro History*, focusing on the scientific study of neglected aspects of Negro life and history. Now called, *The Journal of African American History*, its published quarterly by the University of Chicago Press.

Dr. Woodson served as Dean of the School of Liberal Arts, and Head of the Graduate Faculty at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He also developed the Black Studies curriculum emphasizing historical inquiry.

At the same time, Dr. Woodson established, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History at his home office located at 1538 9th Street, N.W. the three-story building has received designation as a national historic landmark. *ASALH*, the world's oldest learned society established in 1915 continues publishing its journal of scholarly articles and book reviews.

Dr. Woodson's home had designated office space for the promotion of Black history through independent scholarship. Langston Hughes worked there in 1925 as a personal assistant and researcher. And he later became one of the prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1926, Dr. Woodson showcased innumerable contributions of Black Americans by creating, *Negro History Week*. The annual event held during the second week of February simultaneously occurred with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Overtime he expanded the celebration to a month.

This event gained widespread interests on college campuses during the late 1960s. Kent State University, a large public university with a predominantly White student body, held the first *Black History Month* celebration in 1970. And then the Association for the Study of African American Life and History expanded it nationally.

President Gerald R. Ford Jr., officially recognized *Black History Month* in 1976, calling for its nationwide observance. Ten years later, Congress passed a law officially designating February as, "*National Black (Afro-American) History Month*."