



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Biography: Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson

(Excerpts taken from "A Burgeoning Cause" by Charlynnne Spencer Pyne and "Carter G. Woodson" by Korey Bowers Brown.)

Note: suggested vocabulary words are highlighted in blue



Carter Godwin Woodson, "the Father of Black History," was born in Buckingham County, Virginia on December 19, 1875. One of seven children born to James and Anna Eliza Woodson, who were formerly enslaved, Woodson was forced to work on the family farm throughout his youth. However, his parents emphasized the importance of education and racial pride. Due to the demands of **sharecropping**, Woodson was only allowed to attend school four months out of the year, between harvesting and planting. His love for learning grew **exponentially** when he moved to work in the coal mines of West Virginia. There, Woodson became **acquainted** with Oliver Jones, a man he described as well-educated although he was **illiterate**.

When Jones learned that Woodson could read, he engaged Woodson to read the daily newspapers to him and his customers in exchange for free treats. By subscribing to "black" and "white" newspapers, Jones sought to keep **abreast** of the news in the black community, as well as in the nation and the world. Woodson, in acknowledging the educational value of this experience, wrote:

"I learned so much myself because of the much more extensive reading required by him than I probably would have undertaken for my own benefit. ... In seeking through the press information ... for Oliver Jones and his friends, I was learning in an effective way ... history and economics" (Woodson 1944).

The "history of the race" was a frequent topic at Oliver Jones's place. Woodson would listen **intently** as the veterans and "old-timers" talked of their experiences during slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction. He would later become a pioneer in the use of oral history.

Woodson began his formal education when he was 20 years old. His dedication to study enabled him to earn a high school diploma in West Virginia. In 1901, he graduated from Berea College and later worked as a teacher and school supervisor in the Philippines. He became fluent in both French and Spanish and traveled to Paris to study at the acclaimed Sorbonne for one semester. He went on to earn Bachelor's and

Master's degrees from the University of Chicago in just a few years. In 1912, Woodson became the second African American to earn a PhD at Harvard University.

Recognizing the dearth of information on the accomplishments of blacks in 1915, Dr. Woodson founded the *Association for the Study of Negro Life and History* to dispel the myth that the Negro had no history, and to promote the scholarship of black historians. Under Woodson's pioneering leadership, the Association created research and publication outlets for black scholars with the establishment of the *Journal of Negro History* (1916) and the *Negro History Bulletin* (1937), which garners a popular public appeal. Woodson also formed the African-American-owned *Associated Publishers Press* in 1921, which produced several of his own works, including *The Negro in Our History* (1922) and the time-honored classic, *Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933).

In 1926, Dr. Woodson initiated the celebration of Negro History Week, which corresponded with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. In 1970, students from Kent State proposed extending Black History Week to a full month, and were the first to celebrate "Black History Month." In 1976, the federal government officially expanded Black History Week to Black History Month. Today Black History Month garners support throughout the country as people of all ethnic and social backgrounds discuss the global African experience. In honor of all the work that Dr. Carter G. Woodson has done to promote the study of African American history, an ornament of Woodson hangs on the White House's Christmas tree each year.

It is important to note that Woodson developed a thirst for knowledge from elders who could not read or write. These men and women, though illiterate, were extremely knowledgeable about Black history and they instilled in young Woodson the value of knowing the "truth." Woodson's lifelong commitment to rewriting history and education inspired generations of scholars, teachers, students, activists and ordinary men and women to seek the truth about Black contributions to civilization and the development of the modern world.

For additional biographies of Carter G. Woodson, see:

The Library of Congress

Link: <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/94/9403/woodson.html>

Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Link: <http://www.asalh.org/index.html>

Books by Carter G. Woodson:

African Heroes and Heroines. Washington: Associated Publishers, 1944.

African Myths, Together with Proverbs; A Supplementary Reader Composed of Folk Tales from Various Parts of Africa, Adapted to the Use of Children in the Public Schools. Washington: Associated Publishers, 1948.

A Century of Negro Migration. Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1918.

History of the Negro Church. Breinigsville, PA: Nabu, 1921.

Mis-Education of the Negro. 1933.

The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861; A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War. New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915.

Books about the Life and Legacy of Carter G. Woodson:

Pero Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement: Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Goggin, Jacqueline. *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993.