



# COMMUNIQUE

## WE CAN ALL CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH

By Edward M. Yood

**When most people think of the month of February, they typically think of the shortest month of the year. Images of the romantic holiday of Valentines Day, of red roses, chocolate candy, and engagements also come to mind. However, February is also Black History Month — a time to remember and cast a spotlight on important people and events in the history of the African-American movement for justice.**

Black History Month began as a weeklong celebration proposed by Harvard-trained historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926 to honor the contributions, achievements, and vibrant history of Black people in the U.S. and the world. Woodson chose the month of February because of the birth dates of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln on February 14 and February 12, respectively. It is celebrated in Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Following the great strides of the civil rights movement in 1976, President Gerald Ford made Black History Month official, coincidentally during the 200th anniversary of the American Revolutionary War.

But Black History is much more than a month on the calendar; it honors some of the greatest men and women willing to take a stand for equal rights and a better life. In order to see just how far African-Americans have come, it's important to focus on the lesser-known figures who played a large part in history. While everyone knows about Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and Malcolm X, there were dozens who came before and after them who are not quite as famous.

"The history of Blacks and discrimination is an important part of our current fight for equality. That's why we have to keep revisiting that history, and learning everything we can so that history does not repeat itself down the road. In 2019 we have to question why we are still talking about the color of our skin," said Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton."

If you are reading this story with the lights on, then you can thank Lewis Latimer (1848-1928), the son of runaway slaves who settled in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Although he has a large number of inventions to his name, including a safety elevator, perhaps his greatest achievement is his work on the electric light bulb. While Thomas Edison is credited with actually inventing the lightbulb, it originally had a lifespan of just a few days. It was Latimer who found a way to create a filament system that extended the life of the lightbulb. Latimer was the only Black American on Edison's elite team of inventors.

Most Americans probably never heard of Sojourner Truth, an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist who helped recruit black troops into the Union army during the civil war. She was born into slavery before New York had abolished it, but escaped in 1826. After going to court to recover her son in 1828 who had been illegally sold to an owner in Alabama, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man.

In May 1851, she attended the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, where she delivered her famous speech on women's rights, "Ain't I a Woman." A poster with her pictures and words from her speech hangs in the hallways of our great union, CWA Local 1180.

Frederick Douglass was an African American abolitionist, writer, orator, statesman, and active supporter of woman's suffrage who also escaped from slavery. He wrote his first book in 1845. His first autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, a best seller, was so successful that some racist critics questioned whether it could have been written by a black man. He was also the most photographed American of the 19th century.

Ida Bell Wells, also born into slavery, was an African-American investigative journalist, educator, and an early leader in the Civil Rights Movement. She was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

On May 4, 1884, a train conductor with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad ordered Wells to give up her seat in the first-class ladies car and move to the smoking car, which was already crowded with other passengers. The previous year, the Supreme Court had ruled against the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875, which had banned racial discrimination in public accommodations.

On October 26, 1892, Wells began to publish her research on lynching in a pamphlet titled Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases. She followed up with greater research and detail in The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States in 1895, a 100-page pamphlet describing lynching in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

It's a little-known fact that the concept of inoculation was actually introduced to America by a Boston slave named Onesimus. He described to his owner Cotton Mather the process of inoculation that had been performed on him and others in Africa. When Boston experienced a

smallpox outbreak in 1721, Mather promoted inoculation as protection against the disease. A local physician carried out the method Onesimus had described on 242 patients, and only six died, compared to 844 deaths among the almost 6,000 non-inoculated smallpox patients.

While Onesimus might have been one of the first African-Americans to make an outstanding contribution to the medical field, he was far from the last. Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler was the first African-American woman physician in the United States. Born in 1831, she first worked as a nurse in Massachusetts between 1852 and 1860, according to PBS. She was eventually accepted to what was called the New England Female Medical College and earned her medical degree in 1864, according to reports. She practiced medicine in Boston and Richmond, Virginia, primarily working with the poor, who had limited access to medical care. In 1883, Crumpler published a renowned book, *Book of Medical Discourses In Two Parts*, which many believe is the first medical text written by an African-American author.

Matthew Alexander Henson was an African-American explorer who, along with Navy Lieutenant Robert Edwin Peary, led the first expedition to the North Pole. While it was actually Henson who was the first to set foot at the North Pole, it was Peary who got the credit due to the racial superiority complex at the time. Henson finally received his due justice, however, with a Congressional Medal in 1944 and a Presidential Citation in 1950; he is now universally recognized as co-founder of the North Pole.

Another powerful woman to include in the long list of accomplishments would be Bessie Coleman. Born in 1892, she was one of 13 children. She worked hard in her childhood, picking cotton and helping her mother with the laundry, none of which stopped her from graduating high school. After seeing some newsreels on aviation, Bessie wanted to become a pilot, but no U.S. flight schools would accept her because she was Black and female. Not one to take no for an answer, Bessie saved enough money to go to France where she heard women could be pilots. In 1921, she became the first Black woman in the world to earn a pilot's license.

In the 20th century, A. Philip Randolph was an African-American leader in both U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the American labor movement. In 1925 he organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first predominantly African-American labor union. He helped organize labor support to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt to end discrimination in defense plants and President Harry Truman to desegregate the U.S. armed forces. He was also the leading organizer of the famous 1963 civil rights March on Washington.

Almost everyone has heard of Rosa Parks, who in late 1955 refused a white racist bus driver's order to give up her seat to a white passenger and was arrested for civil disobedience that led to the Montgomery bus boycott and the rebirth of U.S. Civil rights movement. What most Americans do not know, however, is that before Rosa Parks, there was Claudette Colvin. On March 2, 1955, the 15-year-old schoolgirl refused to move to the back of the bus, nine months before Rosa Parks took a stand. When the bus driver ordered Claudette to get up, she refused, "It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn't get up." Colvin was arrested and thrown in jail. She was one of four women who challenged the segregation law in court. She wasn't chosen as the poster child for the cause, however, because at the time, the NAACP

and other Black organizations felt Rosa Parks was a better fit as an adult with the right look.

Ever heard of **Daisy Bates**? Not too many Americans can claim they know about the civil rights activist and her work on behalf of the Little Rock Nine, the nine black students who were attending an all-white school as part of the school's desegregation. Bates escorted these students to the school amid intense opposition and heavy threats, and continued to advocate for them once they were enrolled. She was president of the NAACP in Arkansas, where she is now honored with a state holiday on the third Monday of February.

**Josephine Baker** was an American born black entertainer, civil rights activist, and French anti-Nazi agent, who moved to New York to pursue her dream to be an entertainer. When opportunities for her entertainment career were diminished by racial discrimination in 1920's America, Baker moved to France and became an international star as the first African-American to star in a major motion picture in 1927. When Adolph Hitler occupied France, Baker joined the resistance against the Nazis and collected information about German troop locations from officials she met at parties. Although based in France, Baker supported the U.S. Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s. When she arrived in New York, she and her husband were refused reservations at 36 hotels because of racial discrimination. Baker refused to perform for large fees before segregated audiences and wrote articles opposing racial segregation. Because of her civil rights work, the NAACP declared May 20 as Josephine Baker Day. In 1963, she was the only official female speaker at the March on Washington at the side of Martin Luther King Jr.

**Thurgood Marshall** was the legal general of the U.S. civil rights movement winning ground-breaking court decisions knocking down discrimination laws, including those that ended racial segregation in public education. In 1967, he was rewarded for his sage achievements on the legal battlefield by being appointed the first African-American justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

**Lorraine Hansberry** was an African-American playwright and writer, and was the first black female author to have a play performed on Broadway. Her best-known work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, highlights the lives of Black Americans living under racial segregation in Chicago. At the young age of 29, she won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award — making her the first African American dramatist, the fifth woman, and the youngest playwright to do so.

The contributions of African Americans have helped shape our country and culture. It's through the myriad efforts of so many whose names go unrecognized that we have the ability to see the world change. In the words of **Spike Lee** at the 2019 Oscars: "The word today is irony. The date, the 24th. The month, February, which also happens to be the shortest month of the year. Which also happens to be Black History Month. The year, 2019. The year, 1619. History, herstory. 400 years ago our ancestors were stolen from mother Africa and brought to Jamestown, Virginia enslaved. Our ancestors worked the land from can't-see-at-morning to can't-see-at-night...Before the world tonight, I give praise to my ancestors who built our country, along with the genocide of our native people. We all connect with our ancestors. We will have love, wisdom, we'll regain our humanity. It will be a powerful moment." ■