

## Why celebrate Black History Month?

The answer to that somewhat rhetorical question is, for the same reasons we celebrate Women's History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Asian Pacific-Americans Heritage Month and American Indian Heritage: To celebrate the many contributions of that particular group to America and the world.

Young people deserve an accurate history of their country and their community — good and bad - and the Emancipation Proclamation, Brown v. [Board of Education](#), the Montgomery bus boycott, the [Birmingham church](#) bombing and other significant events in African-American history are just as significant in U.S. history. And I know from talking with children and young people that there is a real desire to know more about the African-American heritage - in Houston and Texas and the United States.

That's why we celebrate Black History Month.

Almost a century ago, Dr. Carter [G. Woodson](#), a Kentucky-born, Harvard-educated historian, spoke of the lack of attention paid to black Americans, and in 1926 began a series of lectures, symposiums and exhibitions in order to arouse interest for the little-known Negro History Week in February. Woodson's campaign was successful, and before long mayors and governors was issuing proclamations honoring Negro History Week. Fifty years later - in 1976, the nation's bicentennial - the occasion was expanded to a month with President [Gerald R. Ford](#) urging Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history."

February was highly appropriate, as it includes the birth dates of [Frederick Douglass](#) and [Abraham](#). (It would come to pass that February would have many memorable occasions: passage of the 15th Amendment giving black Americans the right to vote; the election of the first black U.S. senator, Hiram Revels; the founding of the [NAACP](#); and the sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C.)

Martin Luther King, [Duke Ellington](#), [Maya Angelou](#), Sojourner Truth, [W. E. B. DuBois](#), [Jackie Robinson](#), [Hattie McDaniel](#), [Muhammad Ali](#), [Barack Obama](#) - most Americans know the names and most probably know the accomplishments of these people. But there are so many others. The independent business owner Madam [C.J. Walker](#), who created her own hair product company in 1867 and became America's first self-made woman millionaire. The inventor of the traffic signal light and the gas mask, the [Ohioan, Garret A. Morgan](#). And [Otis Boykins](#), who invented electronics crucial to computers. And the pioneering eye surgeon, Dr. [Patricia Bath](#). And one of the greatest inventors ever - he invented 400 products from plants, including peanut butter - [George Washington](#) Carver. And so many others.

In Houston, we have our gallery of notable black achievers - [Barbara Jordan](#), [Mickey Leland](#), [John Coleman](#), [Edith Irby Jones](#), [Lee Brown](#) and again, so many others. Whenever I

think of the importance of education, one gentleman always comes to mind: Rev. [John Henry](#) (Jack) Yates. Shortly after being appointed the first minister of [Antioch Baptist Church](#) in 1868, [Jack Yates](#) began a school for children so they could learn their three R's, just as white children were learning in their schools. And he did something of nearly equal importance: He began night classes at the church so their parents could also learn to read and do math.

So many stories, in Houston alone.

And in Houston, we are preserving our past at [The Buffalo Soldiers Museum](#), The [Houston Museum of African American Culture](#) and the [African-American Library](#) at [The Gregory School](#). I promise you an exciting and informative visit at any of these venues.

I have a picture in my mind - a factual image from history. It is 20-year-old Phillis Wheatley, taken as an 8-year-old from West Africa to be sold in America as a slave and named by her owners, sitting before her admirer Gen. George Washington in 1773, reading her poems which had come to some renown and been published widely. Two great Americans, one a slave and the first well-known poet of our new country, and one, yes, a slaveholder, who would bequeath freedom to his slaves upon his deathbed. And I want all children - black, white, Hispanic, Asian - to know about Phillis' wonderful journey from slavery to fame, her many hardships, her sad end.

Black History Month - an occasion to celebrate Phillis Wheatley and the many thousands of inventive and accomplished African-Americans who came after her.