

African American History: 2009

“The Quest for *Black* Citizenship in the Americas”

African American History Month has long been celebrated in America in one form or another for 83 years. The first recognized celebration was held in 1926, and was organized by historian Dr. Carter Woodson, who called this first celebration Negro History Week. Dr. Woodson, a graduate of Harvard, took it upon himself to begin studying black history and started documenting the contributions of black people to America’s history. Woodson chose February largely because it is the birth month of several notable individuals (W. E. DuBois, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass) and also marks a number of landmark events (passage of the 15 Amendment—right to vote, first US Black Senator—Hiram Revels, founding of the NAACP). [see <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhm1.html>]

Up until the late 1950s, it was not uncommon (especially in the south) for schools, public transportation, restrooms, lunch counters, etc. to be racially segregated. For a quick timeline of events relative to civil rights, go to:

<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html> .

Other exceptionally good websites for information relating to Black History Month are:

www.history.com/minisites/blackhistory

www.biography.com/blackhistory/

www.africanamericanhistorymonth.gov/

Despite the passage of landmark civil rights legislation 44 years ago, and the election of Barack Obama, some would argue that America has not yet achieved full racial integration and equality. During his presidential election campaign, Barack Obama delivered a speech in which he openly discussed race relations in historical as well as contemporary contexts. President Obama’s speech can be found at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/03/18/obama.transcript/#cnnSTCText> .

Certainly the election of America’s first African American President marks a new landmark in American history. Some would argue that America is entering a post-racial era, others argue that America, while becoming increasingly diverse, is entering a new age where race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, national origin, etc. will almost certainly impact politics and the social fabric in ways yet to be discovered. The February 2009 issue of the Atlantic Monthly contains several compelling articles regarding race in America. I urge each of you to take time to review the links listed above, and engage in conversations with friends, family, co-workers, neighbors – and especially to people of a different race from you – and talk about race in America. As Woodson and Obama, and countless individuals before and between them have argued, until each of us is aware of the contributions people of all races have made to America, and the challenges that Americans of all backgrounds have faced and may still face, we will continue to be challenged to fully understand, appreciate, and accept one another, in order to, in the words of our founding fathers, “..form a more perfect union.”