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Keywords

African American history, education, social justice



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Abstract

Dr. Carter G Woodson was an African American historian, author, publisher, and activist. He is known as the Father of Black History. He was the second African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University. He was the founder of the Journal of Negro Education and the Associated Publishers. He wrote many influential books, including *The History of the Negro Church* and *The Miseducation of the Negro*. He died in Washington, DC in 1950.

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Introduction

Dr. Carter G. Woodson was told by his professor, Dr. Edward Channing, that African Americans had no history of significance. American and world history has been filled with misinformation and stereotypes related to people of African descent. The continent of Africa was portrayed as savage and uncivilized. The great kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were unknown. The achievements of African Americans were unrecognized. He decided to make it his life's mission to prove his professor wrong. Woodson engaged in a lifelong struggle to educate himself and then to enlighten his students and, eventually, the nation. His career focused on history, higher education, and social justice.

Early Days

Dr. Carter G. Woodson was born on a small farm in Virginia in 1875, ten years after the end of the Civil War. His parents, James Henry and Annie Eliza, struggled to feed and clothe seven children. The food was scarce, and he would leave the table hungry to go to the woods and pluck persimmons (Hopkinson, 2021). He had only one pair of pants and a shirt to wear for church. He attended school four months out of the year. He was asked to read the newspaper to adults. He drove a garbage truck and worked in the coal mines of West Virginia. A piece of slate

came crashing down on his head in the mines. He worked in the mines for three years (Hopkinson, 2021).

When he was twenty, he moved back to Virginia to start his high school education. He finished his coursework in two years. He then entered Berea College and earned a bachelor's degree in literature. He became a teacher and later a principal at Frederick Douglass High School. He also worked in the Philippines to train natives to govern themselves. Dr. Woodson earned a master's degree at thirty-three from the University of Chicago. He entered Harvard to pursue a doctorate in History. During his matriculation, Dr. Woodson failed his comprehensive history exam and had trouble getting his dissertation approved. At the age of thirty-seven, he earned his degree. Dr. Woodson was determined to prove that Black History was a legitimate field of study (Hopkinson, 2021).

In 1915, he published his first book, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. In 1919, he became the Dean of the Howard University School of the Liberal Arts. He left after one year because of his frustration with the college administration. In 1920, Dr. Woodson became a West Virginia Collegiate Institute Dean. He once again experienced the politics of higher education. Subsequently, he left the university and pursued his life's mission (Goggin, 1997).

Change of Focus

In 1915, Dr. Woodson established the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and led the organization for twenty- 28 years. In response to Dr. Channing's challenge, Dr. Woodson established Negro History Week in 1926 to correlate with the birthdays of Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. He traveled the country, giving speeches and sending pamphlets about the celebration to schools, colleges, and churches. Dr. Woodson developed Negro History Week because African Americans were seen as a burden to society. However, African Americans could excel if given a fair opportunity. African Americans had the power to lead in the struggle to overcome oppression. He succeeded in making Black History a respected academic discipline and popularized it among the masses (Goggin, 1997).

Miseducation of the Negro

Dr. Carter G. Woodson's seminal work was *The Miseducation of the Negro* published in 1933. In this book, he made several important points. Dr. Woodson stressed that modern education had failed to teach African Americans how to make a living. They were unable to provide each other with employment. Dr. Woodson stated that African Americans were trained in corporate America and Wall Street economics. Because of this training, they rejected opportunities to become blue-collar entrepreneurs. He also spoke against universities that were not legitimately accredited but bestowed doctorate degrees upon unworthy candidates (Woodson, 2000).

In other aspects of the book, Dr. Woodson highlighted the church's importance as the community's most vital resource. He stressed that African Americans must refrain from assuming broader society to assist them in their struggle to uplift themselves. They must create opportunities for themselves and overcome their lack of independence.

Dr. Woodson expressed his discomfort about charismatic leadership in the community. He stressed that the community could benefit by having more workers instead of so-called leaders. He stressed that strong speeches and provocative oratory would not free African Americans from their oppression. He also counseled against overusing protest as a strategy without having a concrete, constructive program to stand on (Woodson, 2000).

Role Model

Dr. Woodson was extremely diligent and worked eighteen hours a day. He was a prolific scholar who published more than twenty books. He was also very frugal and lived on only twelve dollars a week. He urged others to avoid debt and live a life of thrift. He lived a life of sacrifice and discipline. He was progressive in his thinking. He endeavored to be self-reliant and independent, inspiring others to do the same. He traveled the world and was extremely well-read. He was an advocate of physical fitness who routinely walked to his appointments. (Dagbovie, 2014).

Past, Present, and Future

Dr. Woodson strongly believed that there was value in the lessons of history. America is debating how history should be taught in the nation's schools. Many people are concerned about whether our nation will continue to embrace our growing diversity or see it as a threat. This year, legislation to restrict history teaching has been introduced in over twenty states. However, an educational underground railroad is being created. In response, African American churches have begun to hold history classes during Bible study. Renowned professor Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw has initiated the "Freedom to Learn" campaign to combat misinformation about Black History. Also, Faith in Florida has started a Black History program that offers an online teaching toolkit of videos and books. (Berry, 2023).

Discussion

I believe that Black History should be taught in America's educational institutions, as should comprehensive courses about Native Americans, Latinos, and LGBTQ communities. Honesty about the past empowers us to live a more harmonious future. America must choose its future direction. The choice is ours to embrace the power of our diversity or retreat into exclusivity.

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