

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

# Why Study African American History?

America's families have come from many places in the world, and America's complete account of history must include all of their stories. In the past, many people who wrote about history did not tell the whole story about all of America's citizens. Many important facts, events and stories were left out. In 1926, Carter G. Woodson, a teacher and author, decided that more people needed to know about Black people in America. Woodson is called the "*Father of Black History*." He thought it was important to know, honor, and celebrate the history of what Black people had done in the past and are doing today.

Many believe that Woodson chose February to celebrate Black History Week because President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were born during that month. Both men are important in African American history. In the 1960s, the celebration changed to Black History Month. Now, some may call this observation African American History Month. While this time of celebration is a good place to begin studying African American achievements, it is important to remember the accomplishments of African Americans throughout the year.

Long ago, African Americans faced slavery, unfair laws, and discrimination. When unjust laws changed, African Americans gained access to better education, jobs and homes. Black people used their strength and courage to overcome many sad times. They began to make their American dream come true. Black people and other citizens, too, are proud of the great achievements of so many African Americans. There are many famous Black doctors, lawyers, teachers, religious leaders, scientists, inventors, politicians, entertainers, athletes and businessmen in the United States. You probably can name some people who fit into each category.

While the concept of democracy and freedom for all is a great idea that most Americans believe in, there is still much that needs to be done to make it

true for everyone. As we read the history lessons from the past, we learn how badly people felt when they were discriminated against and mistreated because of their race. Since we know how terrible it was, we must try to make sure it does not happen again to others.

We all can do something to make sure that discrimination stops. We can all work to understand people who look, worship, or talk differently than we do. Their stories are, also, a part of America's story. With the election of President Barack H. Obama, an opportunity has come to ensure that more people see the importance of learning about the accomplishments of African American people in all walks of life.

As historians study and write about all of America's people, they understand it is good to represent, celebrate and respect different cultures. The story of our country's greatness cannot be told without sharing how all of its citizens live and work together to help America thrive. Historian and scholar W. E. B. DuBois stressed that Black citizens are Americans. They helped to build the infrastructure of the country. He shared this thought when he said that the United States belongs to all of its citizens:

*Your country? How came it yours? Before the pilgrims came we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land, a gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire, Around us the history of the land centered for thrice a hundred years. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation—we have fought their battles, shared their sorrows, mingled our blood with theirs and pleaded with a headstrong people to despise not Justice, Mercy and Truth....* W. E. B. DuBois. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*

Adapted from an article published in *Inquisitive Kids* (2007) by Gwendolyn J. Kelley