

## **Recognizing and Celebrating Black History Month**

**By**

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Black History Month is a vital observance dedicated to honoring the history, achievements, and contributions of African Americans throughout the United States. Its origins trace back to 1926, when historian Carter G. Woodson, a Harvard-educated scholar committed to preserving African American history, established “Negro History Week” through the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, later renamed the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). Woodson selected the second week of February to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (February 12) and Frederick Douglass (February 14), both widely celebrated for their roles in emancipation and advocacy for civil rights. At the time, African American history was absent from public education and mainstream discourse. The week provided a framework for teaching, celebrating, and reflecting on African American contributions to American society. Early recognition came from state Departments of Education in North Carolina, Delaware, and West Virginia, as well as from city school boards in Baltimore, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Local newspapers, churches, and civic organizations helped spread awareness, and Black history clubs emerged in schools and neighborhoods. By the 1940s and 1950s, several city mayors issued annual proclamations recognizing Negro History Week, demonstrating gradual institutional acceptance. Though the terminology reflected common usage of the time, these observances celebrated African American achievement and resilience and laid the foundation for a broader national observance.

During the 1960s and 1970s, amid the Civil Rights Movement and the establishment of Black Studies programs on college campuses, the concept of Negro History Week evolved into Black History Month. Advocates sought a month-long observance to allow for a more in-depth exploration of African American history and contemporary contributions. In February 1970, Kent State University hosted the first campus-wide Black History Month event. In 1976, the ASALH formally expanded the observance to the full month of February. That same year, President Gerald R. Ford issued the first presidential proclamation recognizing Black History Month, urging Americans to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.” This presidential endorsement gave the observance national legitimacy, encouraging schools, cultural institutions, and civic bodies across the United

States to recognize February as a month-long celebration. In 1986, Congress passed Public Law 99-244, formally designating February as “National Black (Afro-American) History Month,” cementing federal recognition of the observance. Over time, what began as a community-driven week of remembrance became a nationally recognized month-long celebration of African American culture, history, and achievement.

Black History Month has grown into a multi-dimensional observance encompassing education, culture, community empowerment, and social justice. The ASALH establishes annual themes, which guide programming across the nation. These themes have addressed topics such as African American contributions to health and wellness, voting rights, labor and entrepreneurship, and resistance to injustice. The observance includes lectures, workshops, exhibitions, performances, and public forums designed to foster understanding of both historical and contemporary African American experiences. By framing Black history within a broader American context, these initiatives encourage reflection, dialogue, and learning that connect past struggles to ongoing efforts for equity and justice.

In California, Black History Month is formally recognized at both state and local levels. The California State Assembly issues resolutions encouraging schools, libraries, and public institutions to participate in Black History Month programming. The Governor’s office also issues proclamations promoting awareness and engagement statewide. Within Santa Clara County, the Board of Supervisors and the Public Health Department formally recognize Black History Month and call on civic organizations, schools, and families to engage in programs that celebrate African American heritage while promoting equity, health, and civic participation. Cities such as San Jose, Gilroy, Sunnyvale, and Mountain View host festivals, lectures, art exhibitions, and workshops in partnership with schools and cultural organizations. The African American Community Service Agency (AACSA) in San Jose, founded in 1978, offers an extensive array of programs during Black History Month, including youth mentorship, educational workshops, lectures, and artistic performances. AACSA’s programs emphasize cultural pride, historical knowledge, social justice, and community resilience, reflecting the ongoing mission to strengthen African American identity.

Educational institutions in the Bay Area contribute significantly to Black History Month programming. San José State University’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library hosts the “Art of the African Diaspora” exhibition each February, providing a platform for artists to explore themes of identity, creativity, and history. Public libraries curate displays, reading lists, children’s programs, and author events, ensuring intergenerational access to African American history. Schools throughout Santa Clara County incorporate Black history into

their curricula, exploring the legacies of prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and local leaders who shaped the region's cultural and civic life. These programs foster awareness of African American contributions to American society while promoting educational equity and social understanding.

Beyond education and culture, Black History Month intersects with community health, advocacy, and civic engagement. Santa Clara County's Public Health Department collaborates with organizations such as the Black Leadership Kitchen Cabinet of Silicon Valley to raise awareness about health disparities affecting African/African-ancestry communities. Events like "Black Family Day" combine cultural celebration with public health education, community resource access, and youth-focused programming. Workshops, performances, and information sessions engage residents in understanding historical context while promoting health, well-being, and community cohesion.

Historical depth is a key component of Black History Month observances. The Phoenixonian Institute, also known as St. Philip's Mission School for African American youth, established in 1861 in San Jose by Peter William Cassey, was the first secondary school for African Americans in California. This institution provided education and social development at a time when public educational opportunities were limited. Although the school closed in the 1870s, its legacy endures in local history projects and heritage preservation efforts, exemplifying early Black initiative, resilience, and community-building. Local historians and community leaders continue to document and preserve the stories of Black pioneers, families, churches, and businesses, highlighting how early communities navigated systemic barriers and built civic, cultural, and educational institutions that have lasting impact.

Black History Month also emphasizes the celebration of African American cultural expression. Across the Bay Area, music, literature, visual art, and dance are central to observances. Festivals, concerts, spoken-word performances, and exhibitions highlight both historical achievement and contemporary creativity. Recent initiatives have emphasized "Black Joy Month," balancing narratives of struggle with celebration of identity, pride, and community resilience. Community organizations, schools, and policymakers use Black History Month as a platform to promote advocacy, civic engagement, and social justice, linking historical awareness to contemporary action.

Key figures celebrated during Black History Month include Carter G. Woodson, whose scholarship emphasized the importance of African American history in education; Harriet Tubman, whose leadership in the Underground Railroad helped free hundreds of enslaved people; Frederick Douglass, whose advocacy for emancipation and civil rights

influenced national policy; Martin Luther King Jr., whose leadership in the Civil Rights Movement advanced the cause of equality through nonviolent protest; and Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her bus seat became an iconic act of resistance to segregation. Local figures, including educators, artists, and community leaders in Santa Clara County, are also celebrated, illustrating the significance of both national and regional contributions.

The impact of Black History Month is expansive, encompassing education, cultural preservation, community engagement, health, and social justice. It fosters understanding, challenges inequities, promotes pride and belonging, and inspires activism. In Santa Clara County and across Silicon Valley, Black History Month strengthens intergenerational dialogue, cultural literacy, and civic awareness. By providing educational programming, cultural events, community outreach, and official recognition at municipal, state, and federal levels, Black History Month ensures that African American contributions are acknowledged, celebrated, and preserved. This observance, rooted in the vision of Carter G. Woodson, continues to evolve, connecting historical scholarship to contemporary social, cultural, and civic priorities, affirming that African American history is integral to the American story and essential to understanding the nation's past, present, and future.