

African-American History Month

Carter Goodwin Woodson saw African American history in the history of the United States as a painful, speechless void in a sea of beautiful voices. Filling this void was his imperative, the sole purpose of his life. He understood that lack of recognition of contributions would lead to misconceptions and lack of appreciation for a people and ultimately to its devaluation whether deliberate or accidental. He also understood that the need to claim accomplishments of a people meant more than taking the credit and accolades that accompany any accomplishment. He is quoted as saying, "If a race has no recorded history, its achievements would be forgotten and, in time, claimed by other groups." In his research he found that achievements of those of African descent were overlooked, ignored or even suppressed by writers of history textbooks.

Prior to 1915, America had no knowledge nor acknowledgment of the contributions and achievements of its black citizens. In 1915, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, history's only person parented by persons formerly held as slaves to receive a Ph.D. in history, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. His goal was to add a forgotten chapter to history's great body of knowledge. Later on in 1926, he created Negro History Week which grew to become Black History Month. Other designated months of study would follow for the contributions of women, Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans and Hispanic-Americans.

For the majority of his life, he dedicated his life to researching and recording the facts of African and African American history. He sacrificed health, happiness and professional gain to write what he felt was the single most barren, impoverished chapter in the wealth known as history.

By the end of his life in 1950, Woodson had lived to see his dream and life's work result in black history being celebrated by parades, speeches, recitations, and banquets across the country as well as libraries, schools and museums offering booklets, books and research on the subject.

Pre Revolutionary War America

Men and women of color have been involved in the American whaling industry since the Revolutionary War. By the 1840s, black sailors comprised a sixth of the whaling labor force; by 1900, the majority of U.S. whalers were of African descent either African Americans or Cape Verdeans (Cape Verde is an island of Africa). Whaling offered black men opportunities nearly unheard of otherwise at that time. One famous whaler was Paul Cuffe. He was born in 1759 and was active in whaling during the Revolutionary War. He lived in Westport, Massachusetts and rose to fame as America's first whaling master of shipowner of African ancestry. His children and other descendants comprised the first dynasty of merchant-entrepreneur seafarers. In 1837, Paul Cuffe's son William commanded an all-black whaling crew on the *Risking States*, a brig owned entirely by African American shareholders. Two of Cuffe's sons-in-law each commanded three whaling voyages; and Cuffe's nephews were also sea captains. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the fishing industry in decline and only a few whaleships in service still, whalers of color encountered new opportunities to realize a chance to serve as captains and shipowners. The largest group was Portuguese-speaking African immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands of West Africa. For these immigrants the whale fishery itself was the attraction to America. Remember shortly before and still about this time, enslavement of African Americans was still practiced in parts of the United States. Others of color were black West Indians, urban Blacks from the industrial cities, and the descendants of rural slaves and sharecroppers from the South, found their way to the shores of new England and California in pursuit of whaling success. Black and Creole mariners became a majority in many ships; crews and on

shipboard, in union halls, and as ship-agents and shareholders. As one mariner said of the opportunity, "There is not that nice distinction made in the whaling as there is in the naval and merchant services; a coloured man is only known and looked upon as a MAN, and is promoted in rank according to his ability and skill to perform the same duties as a white man; his opportunities for accumulating pecuniary means" investing his earnings in whaling capital, is equally the same.

By the time the first shots were fired starting the Revolutionary War, black people, both freedmen and slaves comprised about 22 percent of the then 2.5 million inhabitants of what became the United States. About 5,000 African Americans served under George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Unlike later years, there was no racial segregation of troops. People of all colors fought aside each other. Little is known about the black men who fought on the side of the British during the war. The same promise of fighting in exchange for freedom was offered by both sides.

The Revolutionary War

By 1770, there were an estimated 40,000 or more free blacks in the American Colonies. They included runaway slaves, descendants of early indentured servants, and black immigrants from the West Indies. Many free blacks opposed British rule. More than 5,000 black people fought for independence during the American Revolutionary War. African Americans - free, slave, and ex-slave - fought side by side with white colonists seeking independence from British domination. George Washington, as Commander of the Continental Army, forbade the enlistment of African-Americans during the early stages of the war. He later learned that the Royal Governor of Virginia, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, was enlisting slaves and indentured servants into the British army with the promise of "freedom to all slaves who would join the King's army."

On January 2, 1778, Washington forwarded to governor Nicholas Cooke a letter from General James Varnum advising him that Rhode Island's troop quota should be completed with black soldiers. Washington urged Cooke to give the recruiting officers every assistance. In February, the Rhode Island legislature approved the action. Enlisted slaves received their freedom in return for their service. The resulting black regiment had its first engagement at the battle of Newport, RI in July 1778 where it held off two Hessian regiments. The regiment also fought at the battle of Yorktown. Slaves enlisted in the Continental Army typically receive a subsistence, their freedom, and a cash payment at the end of the war. Slaves and free blacks rarely receive regular pay or land bounties. In 1777, the New Jersey militia act allowed for the recruitment of free blacks but not slaves, as did Maryland's legislature in 1781. March 1781, New York authorized the enlistment of slaves in militia units, for which they received their freedom at the end of the war.

The Revolutionary War helped lead to new attitudes about slavery, especially among Caucasians in the North. The war inspired a spirit of liberty and an appreciation for the service of the black soldiers. Partly for this reason, some Northern legislatures adopted laws during the late 1700s that provided for the immediate or gradual end of slavery. Another reason for such laws was simply that slaves had no essential role in the main economic activities of the North.

War of 1812

The status of African-Americans in colonial America was still in flux and the established laws provided little protection. Even though slave importation was banned by 1808, some 250,000 more slaves were illegally imported into America from 1808-1860. Those African-Americans who were willing and chosen to fight the British for America's defense did so with unusual valor. They fought in various campaigns on both sea and land. Black men served in naval vessels, in

racially mixed regiments, and in all “colored” regiments. Many were taken as prisoners by the British. One exemplary unit was the 26th U. S. Infantry Regiment consisting of 247 “colored” recruits from Philadelphia commanded by Captain William Bezean. Many of these willing and able regiments were held at bay, but many provided the backup and labor to keep the army running effectively.

By the War of 1812, African-Americans were invited to serve on both the British ships and also on the U. S. Navy ships. The Civil War era military enlisted large numbers of African Americans on the ironclad ships and gunboats. Later wars had racial policies which kept the number of African Americans low by assigning them to lesser classifications such as messmen and stewards.

The Civil War

Union troops were comprised of a unique assortment of individuals. There were more than 180,000 blacks who served in U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) units. More than 100 black officers served during the Civil War. Among the Union army's members of color were volunteers from Britain, Canada and Africa as well as free men and women and those who had escaped bondage.

Upon the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter (the start of the Civil War), free black men rushed to enlist but were turned away. A federal law dating from 1792 barred black people from bearing arms for the U.S. army although they had served in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. General Fremont and General Hunter of Missouri and South Carolina issued proclamations that emancipated slaves be permitted to enlist but superiors revoked their orders. Eventually, they were authorized to join.

Union troops were comprised of a unique assortment of individuals. There were more than 180,000 black people who served in U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) units; they represented 10 percent of Union forces. More than 100 black officers served during the Civil War. As well, the U.S. Navy counted 18,000 men (and more than a dozen women) of African descent during the war; that figure amounts to 15 percent of the entire Navy. On some ships more than 90 percent of the crew were African-American. Eight black sailors won the Medal of Honor. Among the Union forces, members of color were volunteers from Britain, Canada and Africa as well as free men and women and those who had escaped bondage. Recent research conducted at the National Archives and the National Park Service has revealed many surprises of foreign volunteers in the American Civil War.

At the time, the U.S. was not a major international political nor military power; then, it was ranked number ten in the world. The country was viewed with some derisiveness because of slavery. Even Mexicans who stormed the Alamo thought poorly of Americans because of slavery. Though Britain at one time permitted slavery, it never was widely accepted and had long since been abandoned. Though many countries continued ages-old serfdom like practices, slavery was not tolerated. With this, it is not entirely unexpected that Federal forces had volunteers from various Asian, African and European countries; to these foreign volunteers, the issue was not states rights nor the preservation of the Union, it was restoration of slaves and slaveholders to humanity.

National Archives data demonstrate foreigners of various ancestries volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army and Navy. Though the U.S. had substantial racial issues, the rest of the world, as evidenced by the nationality of black foreign volunteers, had fewer. Black foreign volunteers came from Canada, Germany, Scotland, Spain, England, and France; records also list black and

“colored”; volunteers such as Peter Mendola, John Afoo and H. Univisky from India, China and Russia. Africans also volunteered for service; records show 31 Navy volunteers from Africa including four from Liberia.

Black troops faced greater danger than other Union troops when captured by Confederate forces. In 1863, the Confederate Congress threatened to punish severely officers of black troops and to enslave black soldiers. That prompted President Lincoln to issue General Order 233 authorizing reprisal on Confederate POWs for mistreatment of black Union POWs. Despite this, black POWs were treated more harshly; Confederate troops under the command of Nathan B. Forrest shot dead black Union POWs captured at Fort Pillow, TN in 1864.

African American Lawmen of the West

The Colorado gold mining town of Yankee Hill desperately needed a new town marshal, having lost its last three after only a three-month stretch. The reason for the high turnover rate was the outlaw, Barney Casewit. Fast with a gun, with no qualms about killing, he had bullied and terrorized the town for two years. The culmination of his vile reign of terror came in 1874. After he raped 15-year-old Birdie Campbell, her father tried to avenge her. Casewit shot the girl's father and then the marshal dead. The marshal's replacement was also outgunned by Casewit. The next lawman turned in his badge and shipped out of town one night after watching Casewit gun down two saddle tramps.

Willie Kennard showed up to answer to the advertisement the town council had placed. When Kennard came out of the blue and said he had read the ad. “You mean you can read, boy?” a councilmen asked. The councilmen said that before they could hire anyone, they had to make certain he was up to the job. Kennard had the job if he could arrest a Barney Casewit who at that very moment was playing poker in Gaylor's Saloon. That was agreeable to Kennard, who pinned on a star and calmly headed for the saloon to make his first arrest. After pausing to size up his quarry, Kennard moved toward Casewit's table. Casewit and his cronies laughed when Kennard told him he was under arrest. Casewit asked, “Where are we supposed to go?” When Kennard told him it was his choice, either jail or hell.

Casewit was not about to let himself be arrested or back down to a black man. Casewit got to his feet and reached for the Colt .44s at his sides. Then according to the autobiography of a witness, Kennard did something only talked about in legend but never before actually seen by anyone there. Kennard drew his revolver and fired into Casewit's still holstered Colts. The impact of the bullets knocked the butts out of Casewit's hands and rendered his guns totally useless. His companions tried to draw on Kennard but were summarily rendered deceased with shots between the eyes. Casewit gave up. Later he was tried and hanged.

During the Civil War Kennard had been a corporal in the 7th Illinois Rifles, a company made up entirely of black volunteers. He was made an instructor at the Montrose Training Camp. After the war, finding few opportunities for civilian employment, Kennard enlisted in a black unit, the 9th Cavalry. He served five years at Fort Bliss, Texas, and then relocated with his unit to Fort Davis, Arizona. He drifted briefly after his enlistment ran out.

By 1877, Kennard had thoroughly tamed the once wild mining town. Kennard, most likely Colorado's first black lawman, decided it was time to move on. He surfaced for a time in Denver in 1884, working as a bodyguard for Barney Ford, a wealthy businessman known as the “Black Baron of Colorado.” The rest of his days are unknown.

A Person of Conscience

Viola Gregg Liuzzo became the only female Caucasian martyr for civil rights in March 1965. She was not a leader in the civil rights movement but a Detroit housewife and mother of five children. Acting on her conscience, Liuzzo volunteered to go to the South and drive protestors after a voting rights demonstration. On one such drive, after having dropped off passengers, she was chased by a carload of Klansmen and shot to death on a deserted stretch of highway. FBI documents released years later revealed that J. Edgar Hoover had tried to smear Liuzzo's reputation by planting stories that she was a drug user and sexually promiscuous. Three people were arrested and charged by the state of Alabama but all-Caucasian juries acquitted them. They eventually were convicted on charges of violating Liuzzo's civil rights and served seven years in prison.