



“Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.”

—Carter G. Woodson

# Carter G. Woodson

## The Father of Black History

By Stan Bumgardner

**M**ore than any other individual, Carter G. Woodson promoted the study and teaching of black history at a time when the contributions of African Americans were almost entirely absent from American history books. A brilliant teacher, college administrator, author, and lecturer, Woodson used his talents to make the American public aware of the African American experience.

Carter Godwin Woodson was born in New Canton, Virginia, on December 19, 1875, to James and Eliza Riddle Woodson. Several years earlier, his father had bought his own farm in New Canton with money he had earned while building railroads in West Virginia. Both of his parents were former slaves who could not read or write. Although Woodson did not have an opportunity to attend school while growing up in Virginia, he taught himself basic reading and math skills. Importantly, his father instilled in him, as he later wrote, a fundamental principle of life: “Learning to accept insult, to compromise on principle, to mislead your fellow man, or to betray your people, is to lose your soul.”

At age 16, Woodson left home to earn a living in West Virginia. After a brief stint laying railroad ties in Charleston, he moved south to Fayette County to mine coal with his brothers. African Americans, along with immigrants from Europe, were pouring into West Virginia’s coalfields during this time. Indeed, between 1870 and 1910, the state’s black population grew from about 17,000 to more than 64,000.

While blacks and whites worked side by side in the mines, Fayette County’s coal towns were segregated. Yet despite the systemic discrimination, Woodson later remembered these days with some fondness. He recalled reading newspapers to illiterate black miners in an informal tearoom operated by an African American named Oliver Jones. While reading

to the men, Woodson learned about national and regional issues of the day, and, influenced by Jones, began developing an intense interest in the history of his race. Though little is known about Oliver Jones, Woodson described his time in the tearoom as a “godsend.”

About the time Woodson left home, his family moved to Huntington, where his father got a job in the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway shops. In 1895, after earning some money in the mines, Woodson joined his parents in Huntington. He often visited his father at the railroad shops, where many of the older workmen chatted about their Civil War experiences. On one occasion, Woodson’s father got in a fistfight with a Confederate veteran who had defended the South’s role in the war. The elder Woodson won.

Despite being 20 years old, Woodson enrolled in Huntington’s Frederick Douglass High School, an African American school where two of his uncles were teachers and his cousin, Carter Harrison Bennett, was the principal. Demonstrating his aptitude for learning, he graduated in less than two years. After earning his high school diploma, he studied for a brief time at Berea College in Kentucky. However, he lacked enough money to continue with his education, so he returned to Fayette County to teach at an African American school at Winona, near the mines where he had worked a few years earlier. Then, in 1900, at age 24, he moved back to Huntington to succeed his cousin as principal of Douglass High.

### Traveling the World

While serving as principal of Douglass, Woodson again began taking classes part time at Berea and graduated in 1903. He then took advantage of a U.S. War Department program that recruited educators to teach in the Philippines for double what they could earn in the United States.

After teaching in the Philippines for more than two years, he embarked on a trip around the world that included stud-

ies at the Sorbonne in Paris. After returning to the United States, he entered the University of Chicago and earned a master's degree with a thesis on eighteenth-century French diplomacy. In 1912, he became only the second African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard—the first being noted scholar and NAACP cofounder W. E. B. DuBois. His doctoral dissertation was on the factors that led to West Virginia statehood. In this work, he asserted what has become a commonly accepted premise: West Virginia's split from Virginia grew from decades of geographic and economic differences that had divided the two regions. In little more than 20 years, Woodson had gone from working as a sharecropper to mining coal, to becoming a teacher and then a principal, and, finally, to earning a doctorate from Harvard.

During his time at Harvard, history professor and student advisor Edward Channing challenged Woodson, insisting that African Americans did not deserve a distinct history of their own and mocking the involvement of blacks in various historical events, including the Boston Massacre. Angered but at the same time motivated by Channing's views, in 1915, Woodson cofounded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. That same year, he published his first book, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. The following year, he launched *The Journal of Negro History*.

In 1918, Woodson became dean of liberal arts at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Despite being one of the nation's most prominent African American colleges, Howard had never offered courses in black history until Woodson introduced them.

Just a year after his appointment to Howard, Woodson was offered a chance to return to the Mountain State to serve as president of the West Virginia Collegiate Institute (now West Virginia State University) at Institute in Kanawha County. Questioning whether he could commit the proper time to the job, he declined the offer but recommended a

friend, John W. Davis. The 31-year-old Davis had no experience in education administration and was serving as secretary of the Washington YMCA. Yet Davis was brilliant and Woodson's instincts were on target. Over the next 34 years, Davis molded West Virginia's black land grant institution into one of the nation's premier African American colleges.

Unfortunately, Woodson's time at Howard was not as pleasant or longstanding as Davis's time in Institute. He regularly clashed with President J. Stanley Durkee. The last white president of Howard, Durkee was considered by many faculty members to be too conservative and too resistant to the study of African American history and culture. In June 1920, Durkee fired Woodson.



**A young Carter Woodson** Photo courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives

### Return to West Virginia

However, Woodson, who by now was becoming well known nationally, did not stay unemployed for long. Just weeks after his dismissal from Howard, Woodson's friend John W. Davis appointed him dean of the College Department at West Virginia Collegiate Institute, his last professional appointment. (Note: The institute also had a college preparatory department, but Woodson was essentially appointed dean of the college.)

During Woodson's two-year stint as dean, the college's enrollment increased by 50 percent, as the school introduced new courses in psychology, economics, mathematics, natural sciences, English, Latin, Greek, history, political science, and philosophy. During his tenure at Institute, he also published three books: *The History of the Negro Church*; *Early Negro Education in West Virginia*; and his

seminal work, *The Negro in Our History*.

While serving as dean at Institute, Woodson also solicited substantial funding from philanthropic organizations, including the Carnegie Foundation, to pursue his studies independently. In 1921, he founded Associated Publishers, which today is the nation's oldest African American publishing company.

Woodson resigned from the college in 1922, moved back to Washington, and became a much-sought-after speaker. In the second week of February 1926, he and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History launched the first Negro History Week. This event later evolved into Black History Month, first recognized nationally by President Gerald Ford in 1976 as part of the country's bicentennial celebration.

For the rest of his life, Woodson researched history, gave speeches, and wrote articles and books, including *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830*; *Free Negro Heads of Families in the United States in 1830*; *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860*; *Negro Makers of History*; and *The Miseducation of the Negro*. As the years went by, he became more radical in his views and in his criticism of civil rights groups like the NAACP and the National Urban League, which he thought were not moving swiftly or forcefully enough toward change. In the process, he spurred these organizations toward more progressive political stances and activities.

Preoccupied with teaching and writing, Carter Woodson never married or had children. He died in Washington on April 3, 1950, at age 74. Today, he is acknowledged as both the "Father of Black History" and the "Father of Black History Month." A statue erected along Huntington's Hal Greer Boulevard to honor Woodson was dedicated in 1995, and a gravestone in the city's Spring Hill Cemetery marks his parents' final resting place. Some 300 miles away, Carter Woodson's home at 1538 9th Street NW in Washington, D.C., is now a national historic site managed by the national park service.

Woodson's expansive body of work established black history as a field of study and helped shatter negative stereotypes about African Americans. He underpinned his writings with a belief that by becoming more aware of their history, African Americans would develop a greater sense of self-esteem. 🌱

---

*Freelance historian and exhibit developer Stan Bumgardner is the former acting director of the West Virginia Division of Culture & History's Museums section, where he served as creative director for the West Virginia State Museum renovation. He has also authored two books and numerous articles for Goldenseal and American History magazines. He is a regular contributor to Wonderful West Virginia.*

**A statue honoring the** life and legacy of Carter Woodson stands on Hal Greer Boulevard in Huntington. Photo by David Fattaleh courtesy of the West Virginia Department of Commerce

Woodson's father instilled in him, as he later wrote, a fundamental principle of life: "Learning to accept insult, to compromise on principle, to mislead your fellow man, or to betray your people is to lose your soul."

