



Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, Inc.

February 1, 2023



Dr. Carter G. Woodson.

Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,

I am supposed to be writing about Black history.

I am supposed to be writing about Black History Month and [Carter G. Woodson](#) and sharing the story about how all of this got started...

But I can't.

We are taught that those who don't know their history are destined to repeat it. But we KNOW our history. We have known it from the moment those [first 20-30 enslaved Africans stepped onto the shores of Virginia in 1619](#) to the moment that Tyre Nichols passed on to the next life in a hospital bed in Tennessee, the victim of a savage and unconscionable beating that resulted in his murder. We know it from even before setting foot on these shores, back to the lush and open lands of Africa up and down the Ivory Coast and across the Serengeti. We know it further back into antiquity and the first civilization in the heart of Egypt. But it has only been since we landed on these shores, brought over in bondage, subjugated in Slavery, oppressed by Jim Crow and maligned and marginalized by systemic racism for over 400 years; that though we know our history, we are being **forced** to repeat it.

Or rather, it is being repeated on us.

Carter G. Woodson created the concept of Negro History Week, because he felt that amidst the era of Jim Crow, there was so much oppression, so many stereotypes and misinformation being put forth to justify the segregation and malignment being visited upon Black people, that he believed that telling the truth would make a difference. He believed that sharing the accomplishments, the significance, the fortitude of Black people would not only empower us, but allow the white establishment, the white community to see how wrong they were to marginalize us.

And yet, here we sit, as "the darker brother," still being sent to eat in the kitchen, still being beaten down for breathing, still being killed...for being Black.

100 years ago, this past month, the town of [Rosewood, Florida](#) was erased from the map as white men from all around the area took it upon themselves to administer their own brand of "law" and "justice" based on the false accusation of a white woman that a Black drifter, instead of the white man she was having an affair with, had beaten her. The "investigation" was vicious, racist white men, scouring through the community looking for this nonexistent drifter by beating and murdering, especially through lynching, any Black person who did not give them the answer they sought-the location of this fictitious assailant. No one could direct them to someone who didn't exist; and so, not for lying or misleading, but for telling the truth that the racist white men didn't want to hear, those Black men were murdered...lynched in the backwoods of Florida

This was not the story that Woodson sought to tell.

Woodson had devoted his life to research, and had collected thousands of artifacts, documents, and items of cultural significance to illustrate the story of African Americans. He felt that the accomplishments and contributions of African Americans "were overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and the teachers who use them;" and racism was the natural progression of this phenomenon left unchecked. Woodson believed that knowledge and awareness were the key to combatting racial prejudice.



Rosewood, Fl Massacre

In 1915, Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History](#)) "to treat the records scientifically and to publish the findings of the world' in order to avoid 'the awful fate of becoming a negligible factor in the thought of the world.'" In other words, to be more than an afterthought; to be recognized, even prominent, in history. In 1916, Woodson began publication of the scholarly [Journal of Negro History](#), renamed in 2002 to the Journal of African American History. It has never missed an issue, despite the Great Depression, loss of support from foundations, two World Wars and the rash of racial violence in the early part of the 20th century.



National Guardsmen questioning a Black man in Chicago after the riot in 1919

The summer of 1919, designated [Red Summer](#) by James Weldon Johnson, Field Secretary for the NAACP and author of "[Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing](#)," was a particularly brutal period in which approximately 1000 people, nearly all Black, were killed in race riots instigated by white people, in over 36 cities across the United States, and one rural county in Arkansas, between May and September of that year. White supremacists, from the [Klu Klux Klan](#) members to law enforcement officers to average racist white people, attacked Black people in these cities across America. In major cities such as Chicago and Washington D.C., Black people fought back and suffered losses of life and property; however, it was the rural county around Elaine, Arkansas which saw the greatest number of casualties. As many as 856 Black people and 5 white people died in perhaps the bloodiest example of union busting and racial violence in American history, the [Elaine Massacre](#).

The Elaine Massacre occurred because a group of about 100 Black sharecroppers were holding a union meeting to discuss securing a fair settlement from the planters for the annual cotton crop. Though they were members of an official union (Progressive Household Union), union organizing by Black people was seen as a direct challenge to the Jim Crow system and as such was often shut down through violence, if not outright murder. In this case, the local planters had spread rumors that the sharecropper's union meeting was actually a planning meeting for a revolt whereby the union members were going to kill white people and take their land. Nevermind the fact that they were in the height of Jim Crow where looking a white person in the eye could get you killed, we are expected to believe that 100 African Americans were going to kill white landowners and somehow, successfully, take over and retain their land. Whether they believed it or not, it gave white people the justification to amass as many as a thousand armed white persons to proceed in the massacre. When the Governor sent in US troops to settle things down, many of them joined in the killing.



Elaine Massacre defendants and their counsel

In the end, as things "settled down", 285 Black men were arrested for what was termed a "revolt by the Black community", which was put down by US troops. 122 of those Black men were charged with crimes from murder to nightriding, 12 of those men were sentenced to death by electric chair. This frightened 65 others into taking plea "bargains" of 21 years for second degree murder (despite the fact that they were merely defending themselves from union busting, murdering racists) if they were even involved in the violence at all, which many were not. Arkansas swept it under the rug, and the official account and numbers were drastically different.

It was events like these which moved Woodson to act. Two years later, in 1921, the [Tulsa Race Massacre](#) would occur, marking one of the single worst incidents of racial violence in America and the first time that bombs were dropped on American soil. Two years later would bring Rosewood. But while the 1920s were steeped with racial violence, it was also a very significant time of racial awakening and Black consciousness with the [Harlem Renaissance](#) and the founding of the [Universal Negro Improvement Association](#) led by [Marcus Garvey](#), among other events. Pivotal movements like these, combined with the atrocities of racial violence, pushed Woodson to push even further into the community to create a lasting impact that would accomplish his goals of recognition and inspiration. And thus, in 1926, the idea was made real with the advent of "Negro History Week" designated for the second week in February, so that it coincided with the birthdays of [Abraham Lincoln](#) and [Frederick Douglass](#).

"Negro History Week" was a success with celebrations arising all across the country featuring parades, breakfasts, lectures and more. It continued to grow over the years and in 1970, The Black United Students and Black educators of Kent State University expanded the celebration to the whole month we celebrate now. Beginning with President [Gerald Ford](#) recognizing Black History Month in 1976, during the celebration of the [United States Bicentennial](#), every US President since has recognized February as Black History Month. Ford urged Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history." Following that, it has remained a fixture in American culture and society.

Carter G. Woodson envisioned a world where knowing the contributions, the accomplishments, and the endeavors of African Americans would engender our acceptance, acknowledgement and advancement. He felt that if the world could only see what we could do, that equality would win out

and racial prejudice would become a thing of the past.

But what Woodson didn't know, what I don't think any of our great scholars knew, was just how pervasive systemic racism is and how woven into our society it has become. It is not something that just affects white people, it affects ALL people. No, I'm not talking about the silly notion of "reverse racism," which does not exist, but rather the ignorance and misinformation, or rather "mis-education," that has seeped into our laws, our practices, our literature, our social media, etc. It has melded in with every aspect of our society such that 5 Black officers can beat Tyre Nichols near to death and not realize how much a part of this entrenched system of oppression they are.

"The oppressor has always indoctrinated the weak with his interpretation of the crimes of the strong."

-Carter G. Woodson, "The Mis-Education of the Negro"

I am supposed to be writing about Black History, and I guess in a sense I am. Since the advent of police as Slave Patrols in 1704, there has been a fundamental part of law enforcement devoted to the systematic oppression of Black, Indigenous and other People of Color. And it is our failure to recognize and acknowledge this that has done a disservice to good law enforcement officers working to try to change the system from within, to communities which deserve the same protection and relationship with law enforcement that affluent white communities have, to our children whom we teach to seek out law enforcement in an emergency, and most especially, to the Black and brown people who continue to get murdered by racist and indoctrinated officers who cannot tell right from wrong-the "few bad apples" who continue to "spoil the bunch" because this excuse continues to be accepted.

All law enforcement officers are not bad and/or racist. But there IS systemic racism intrinsic to our system of law enforcement and justice. If we don't recognize that, if we don't call it out and address it, then we are complicit in the racism that occurs and the death that it deals. We become the bad apples.

We know our history, and our history is repeating itself. We must take this time to act, not turn our back on it, not hide from it, not allow our leaders to "politic" it away lest we allow the orchard of our community to be overrun with rotten fruit. All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to stand by and do nothing.

We cannot stand by.

We must not do nothing.

We must recognize that America has a long history, not just recently, but since its inception, of killing unarmed Black people, and we are well past the deadline for that to stop.

We must make a choice, together, as a nation, that justice can and must prevail; that our priority and our value has to be, that Black lives really DO matter.

Happy Black History Month!

Respectfully,



Jonathan Palmer
Executive Director

For more information and details on racism and other significant parts of our history, please visit our [Addressing Systemic Racism](#) page on our website.

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