

# MONITOR Microscope

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wanted ordinary Black men and women to become aware of their history and develop pride in their race.

## The Birth of Negro History Week

In the early 1920's, the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity had begun to be known for its annual celebration honoring the literary achievements of Blacks. Dr. Woodson, who was an honorary member of the fraternity, suggested to his Omega brothers that the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History sponsor this celebration and make it a tribute to the contribution of Blacks in all fields. Thus, in 1926—largely because of the endeavors of Dr. Woodson, Omega Psi Phi and others—the first annual Negro History Week was observed and was an immediate national success. Today, the Negro History Week celebration has been expanded to the month-long Black History Month observance.

## Purpose of Black History Month Observances

The purpose of our Black History Month observances remains the same today as when Negro History Week was first launched—to present to Blacks and to the world the deliberately-overlooked achievements of our entire race of Afro-Americans. The various forms of media and other opinion shapers oriented largely to White Americans, then as now, continue to propagandize—at a great and tragic cost to all Americans—a negative stereotype of Blacks.

Dr. Woodson's goal was to correct these false and highly-destructive images of all Black Americans so that our race might "escape the awful fate of becoming a negligible factor in the thought of the world." For how is it possible to think positively about any group whose past is viewed negatively?

## The Nurture of Black Self-Esteem

A concurrent goal of Dr. Woodson was to counteract the devastating effect of these false images upon the self-esteem of Blacks. He wanted us to know that we had as much or more in our history of which to be proud as any other race. Whenever possible, he said in effect to us, "It is true that we are the descendants of slaves—but our ancestors were forcibly enslaved and never ceased to struggle for freedom. Furthermore, our enslaved African ancestors had a mighty and distinguished history *before America was 'discovered' and before Europe had emerged from the Dark Ages.* And we, the diaspora of Africa, in every generation upon these shores, have made contributions of incomparable value to the growth and prosperity of America."

## AOIP Builds Self-Esteem

The work of building Black self-esteem, especially in our youth, is a never-ending task because we continue to be surrounded by corrosive false images. One of the basic focuses of the national Assault On Illiteracy Program (AOIP)—as a basis for motivating our people to feel good enough about themselves to want to learn—is on building positive self images in our functionally-illiterate people.

AOIP is an all-volunteer program, involving over 80 Black-led organizations working interorganizationally to confront the illiteracy predicament in Black America, which has reached near epidemic proportions. In 1980, 44 percent of Blacks, age 18 and over, were found to be reading at about the fourth grade level. Many of these Blacks had high school diplomas. Today, the illiteracy rate is over 47 percent, and if it continues unabated, by the year 2000, 60 percent of Black Americans will be functionally illiterate.

The AOIP experience has been that Black functional illiteracy stems not from an inability to learn but from a lack of motivation to learn that is largely reflective of low self-esteem.

Carter G. Woodson clearly understood the relationship between low self-esteem and low achievement. He translated this understanding in terms of race and foresaw a bleak future for Black achievement if we did not take pride in our history. He saw the power and critical importance of self-affirmation and the faith in the future that is allied with a positive outlook. In *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Dr. Woodson said: "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions."

Today, AOIP is paying tribute to the legacy of Dr. Carter G. Woodson by not only honoring the leadership of the 17 Black-owned hair care and beauty aid manufacturers who are associated together in the American Health and Beauty Aids Institute (AHBAI)...but also are committing their organizations to a continuing tribute to what these business pioneers have stood for by buying the AHBAI companies' products and encouraging all others to do likewise.

## U.S. Postage Stamp To Commemorate Mary McLeod Bethune

Another powerful builder of Black self-esteem was Mary McLeod Bethune

(1875-1955). On March 5th, a new 22¢ commemorative first class stamp honoring Mrs. Bethune will be unveiled at the United States Postal Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Mary McLeod Bethune not only founded a university on \$5.00 and faith and served as an advisor to Presidents, but 50 years ago she also founded one of the world's largest national organizations of women, the National Council of Negro Women.

Born to slave parents in rural Mayesville, South Carolina, Mrs. Bethune was determined to educate herself and use her life to help open new educational and social avenues for her people and other disadvantaged persons. In a junk yard in Daytona Beach, Florida, using apple crates for seats, she founded the school which became Bethune-Cookman College. Today, the college is among the most highly regarded learning institutions in the country. More than 300 young men and women are graduated annually.

Mrs. Bethune once remarked, "Education is the great American adventure, the largest public enterprise in the United States, the country's most impor-

tant business." She travelled across the country teaching that education was the key to opportunity and that civil rights without enlightenment was meaningless. She believed there was no human dignity in ignorance.

In 1935, Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women, an organization that she used to encourage women to unite for personal strength and development. Today, the National Council continues her legacy in their 50th anniversary year under the leadership of Dr. Dorothy I. Height.

Besides being memorialized by the new U.S. stamp, Mrs. Bethune is the only Afro-American to have a memorial on federal parkland in the nation's capital. Etched on the base of the Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park are the following words from her Last Will and Testament:

*I Leave You Love...I Leave You Hope...I Leave You the Challenge of Developing Confidence in One Another...I Leave You a Respect for the Use of Power...I Leave You Faith...I Leave You Racial Dignity...I Leave You a Desire to Live Harmoniously With Your Fellow Man...I Leave You, Finally, a Responsibility to our Young People.*



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