

Black History and Black History Month

In 1964, the great writer James Baldwin, in reflecting on his education, said this: “When I was going to school, I began to be bugged by the teaching of American history because it seemed that that history had been taught without cognizance of my presence.” Baldwin was right: In the mid-1960s, the most widely-read textbook for eighth-grade U.S. history classes (published in Texas) mentioned only two black people in the entire century of history reaching back to the Civil War.

Baldwin was expressing the perception of black thinkers before him, including W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Goodson, the brilliant historian and educator. Recognizing that black Americans were disregarded in the books and conversations that shaped American History, Goodson wrote: “If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.” So in 1915 with Jesse Moorland, he founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) to promote research and provide resources for educators. In 1926 he launched a “Black History Week” in February, encompassing the birthdays of Frederick Douglass on February 14th and Abraham Lincoln on February 12th.

The idea became widespread, promoted by teachers and clubs, and it was a feature of the Freedom Schools in the South during the Civil Rights movement. Launched by protests at SF State and UC Berkeley in 1968, Black Studies departments were created for the first time, and colleges and universities began adopting February as Black History Month. In 1976, the 50th anniversary year of Goodson’s creation and America’s Bicentennial year, it became an official national observance by presidential decree. Every year there is a theme given by ASALH; for 2020 it was, quite fittingly, “African Americans and the Vote”; for 2021 it is “The Black Family: Representation, Identity, and Diversity.”

Many educators believe that every month is black history month. We subscribe to that approach here at SFWHS: we began the year in US History with the essay “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones of the New York Times who won a Pulitzer Prize for the 1619 Project. The project challenges us to look at American History as beginning with the arrival of the first slave ship in Virginia, and to examine the consequences of slavery for our nation as a whole, which are deep and far-reaching. As teachers, we support the current efforts to include African American History and Ethnic Studies requirements in the public school curricula. The goal is to commit to the need for racial equity to advance our ideals of democracy, and to realize, in the wise words of Toni Morrison, “There is no such thing as race. None. There is just a human race - scientifically, anthropologically. Race is a construct, a social construct... it has a social function, racism.”

With homage to the great Howard Zinn, who began a revolution in the teaching of history with the publication of *A Peoples’ History of the United States* in 1980, we incorporate a “bottom up” approach in our US History curriculum. We study the history of those who have been oppressed, marginalized, disregarded, and dispossessed: including narratives and voices of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, women, immigrants, workers, and the LGBTQ community. Black History in particular illuminates our national striving to realize our ideals of freedom and democracy. As Nikole Hannah-Jones says, “Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all.”

Black history needs to be a constant theme throughout our teaching, and not confined only to February. Yet we can also join in the national recognition by bringing a special emphasis this month. Our 11th grade students research the lives of black Americans who stand out for their contributions to our society and our lives, some who are well known, and others who deserve to be. Students choose a remarkable person to study from many fields of endeavor – science, business, journalism, research, the arts, philanthropy, politics, law, education, medicine, sports, social activism, and more. Every student should know of the contributions of civil rights heroes like Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, and writers of great wisdom like Maya Angelou. Our students create written biographies, and each student shares their discoveries with their class or with the entire student body at an assembly, so we can recognize and celebrate this part of our history together.

– *David Weber, February 2021*