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Black American History

for
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The long road
to freedom

—
The Civil Rights
Movement and beyond

—
Black culture
in America

Ronda Racha Penrice



Black American History

by Ronda Racha Penrice

**for
dummies**
A Wiley Brand

Black American History For Dummies®

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Introduction

Black history as American history is a truth that has become increasingly more accepted since *African American History For Dummies* appeared more than a decade ago. The mainstream amplification of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre in such shows as *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country*, both from HBO, along with triumphant hidden history like mathematician Katherine Johnson's role in putting a man on the moon as shown in the Oscar-nominated *Hidden Figures*, have highlighted how little the average American, Black, white, Latino, Asian, indigenous, and more, actually knows about Black American history aside from the obvious Black History Month mainstays. For many, the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown, and more point to the devastating role this nation's history of racial discrimination plays in modern policing. All these events drive home the pressing need for a more inclusionary American history curriculum.

Carter G. Woodson, the man who created Negro History Week, which evolved into Black History Month, actually envisioned a time when general American history would incorporate Black American history. He believed that this important aspect of the nation's collective history was for all to know. It's a core belief that modern Black history experts cosign.

"Black history is American history, and American history is Black history. You can't have one without the other," Dr. Dwight McBride, an African American studies expert who became president of The New School in New York City in 2020, has said. "And if you're going to tell a story of America, and leave out Black people, it's going to be a

very incomplete, not to mention unsatisfying and dishonest, story.”

Black American history is so much more than a handful of extraordinary individuals or cruel institutions like slavery and Jim Crow, or the ongoing battle for civil and human rights steeped in the Black Lives Matter movement. A lot of it is painful, but it’s also inspiring and triumphant. History can give people the courage and strength to become better, to do better. “You can never know where you are going unless you know where you have been,” said civil rights trailblazer Amelia Boynton Robinson, who almost lost her life on the Edmund Pettus Bridge during Bloody Sunday in 1965.

Sadly, it has taken the Civil War, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and a lot of struggle in between — and after — to even begin securing Black Americans the basic right of citizenship that many white Americans take for granted. *Black American History For Dummies* isn’t a big sermon on this struggle; instead, it’s a straightforward, interesting, and honest overview of Black American history from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s up to today. I hope this history sheds light on both the significance of Barack Obama’s election as president and why the Black Lives Matter movement exists. Along the way, this history has birthed a culture that includes the Black church and education, as well as music, literature, film, television, and sports.

About This Book

Making this book as thorough (within the page constraints) and as engaging as possible has been a top priority for me. So consider *Black American History For*

Dummies an introduction to a vast and vastly interesting subject. I hope it inspires you to seek out more information (in addition to books, I suggest quite a few documentaries and other movies that bring history to life). At the very least, look at the contributions of Black Americans with new eyes.

Of course, in deciding what to include, I tried to be as objective as possible. I sifted through many history books and online sources, and checked and double-checked numerous dates and facts so that you could trust the information contained in this book. Because that information is often ugly, there is objectionable language in quotes, songs, movie titles, and the overall history itself. So do know that keeping the context of the times in mind is required.

I have a personal connection to the book. My grandfather, a Mississippian from birth to death, came from a family of sharecroppers. My great aunt sang blues songs at family gatherings and told the best stories, some of which I later found in a book of “Negro” folklore. My grandmother never tired of sharing family stories with me, even a tragic one about the unsolved murder of her brother who migrated to Chicago in the 1930s. Of course, my whole family has plenty of stories about the civil rights movement, and, yes, I wish I had first learned about the Ku Klux Klan in books or on TV.

I’ve lived a little bit of Black American history myself, too. I was a middle school student when Harold Washington became Chicago’s first Black mayor, and, wouldn’t you know, David Dinkins became the first Black mayor of New York City when I moved there for college? Did I know that LL Cool J would become a global rap pioneer or a successful actor when I bumped into him at NYC clubs? Certainly not, but in Los Angeles, I did know

that meeting Fayard Nicholas of the legendary Nicholas Brothers dance duo was a huge privilege. I also cherished seeing Halle Berry, Will Smith, and Denzel Washington at the Academy Awards luncheon the year Berry and Washington won their Oscars. Braving the cold for Barack Obama's historic 2009 inauguration as the nation's first Black president was simply amazing. Still, one of my biggest thrills in life was meeting Muhammad Ali in Chicago when I was young.

Black American History For Dummies is the actual history behind these personal experiences and hopefully explains why these events mean so much. In my effort to reveal the interesting side of history (believe me, there is one!), I hope you'll also embrace this history and share it. The ultimate goal of this book for me is to make Black American history accessible without sacrificing, well, the history.

This book is chock-full of interesting information and stories to help give you a more complete picture of Black American history. Specifically, you can find details about the following:

- » The role the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown played in sparking the Black Lives Matter movement
- » How Black TV and film exploded in the 2010s
- » The resurgence of political activism among Black athletes
- » How Black literature has further expanded
- » The changes afoot in the Black church

Foolish Assumptions

In writing (and revising) *Black American History For Dummies*, I had to make some assumptions about you, the reader. On top of my main assumption — that Black American history is important for everyone, not just Black Americans — here are a few others:

- » You suspect that Black American contributions to American history run deeper than you learned in required history classes but don't know how to prove it.
- » At one point, you tried to read about Black American history, but just couldn't find enough of what you needed to know in one spot and don't like the idea of having to dust off your high school or college research skills or cultivate them.
- » You picked up bits and pieces of Black American history here and there but want an accessible reference where you can go to find out more.
- » You're naturally inquisitive and open to finding out more about Black Americans and their struggles and triumphs, as well as their contributions to the nation overall.

Icons Used in This Book

The little pictures you see attached to paragraphs throughout the book are another of the standard, helpful *For Dummies* features. They flag information that's special and important for one reason or another. *Black American History For Dummies* uses the following icons:



**HISTORICAL
ROOTS**

This icon accompanies information that explains where something — an organization, an event, and so on — originates. Perhaps you didn't know, for example, that other civil rights activists used sit-ins before they became popular in the 1960s.



**BLACK
AMERICAN
FACES**

This icon of a magnifying glass focuses on the details of Black Americans, especially those not typically spotlighted, who did some outstanding things that warrant further explanation.



**IN THEIR
OWN WORDS**

Words say a lot. Surely, someone who made the brave decision to flee can better tell you how scary running away really was or what freedom truly means than I can. Besides, many of the quotations and excerpts that carry this icon are just outright inspiring.



**TECHNICAL
STUFF**

Although I find everything in this book enlightening, I admit that it isn't all necessary in order to understand the topic. This icon points out what you may want to read but don't have to. It also highlights some interesting facts you might not know, like the fact that Mississippi didn't ratify the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery until 1995.



REMEMBER This icon points to facts or ideas that you should, well ... remember. Essentially, it's important stuff that's had a major impact on Black American and American history and therefore shouldn't be overlooked.

Where to Go from Here

Now's the time to dive into this book in the way that best suits you: I can't tell you which chapter to choose or part to read. Flip to the Table of Contents or index and find a topic that interests you. Skip around. Fast forward ahead or travel back in time. Within each chapter, sidestep sidebars or read only the text with Remember icons. Or if you like, read *Black American History For Dummies* from cover to cover. If you want a good overview of the book, start with [Chapter 1](#) and find a topic that interests you. [Part 2](#) delves deeper into slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Or if you want to read more about how Black Americans have contributed to culture and sports, start with [Part 5](#). For a handy reference guide, head to www.dummies.com and search for the "Black American History For Dummies Cheat Sheet." It's completely up to you.

Part 1
Coming to America

IN THIS PART ...

Get an overview of Black American history and culture, touching on the legacy of Carter G. Woodson who pioneered the field, identifying the past and present challenges stemming from anti-Blackness, exploring how Black Americans embrace the past personally and institutionally, as well as uncovering the push behind reparations.

Discover how Africans found themselves in the New World and the horrors they endured as commodities who largely built the American colonies effectively making England a world power in the process.

Understand how despite the disappointment of the American Revolution that promised freedom to all but denied it to the enslaved, they managed to become a nation within a nation, continuing the fight for freedom from enslavement that lasted roughly another 100 years.

Chapter 1

The Soul of America

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » **Capturing the Black American experience throughout history**
 - » **Examining advances and challenges for Black Americans**
 - » **Exposing all Americans to Black American history**
 - » **Remaining conscious of unresolved issues**
-

The word “Sankofa” from the Akan people in present-day Ghana and the Ivory Coast roughly translates to “knowing the past to know your future.” The collective recognition of Black American history has come in stages and is frankly still evolving. In the mid-1970s, Americans felt that connection to a certain degree when Alex Haley’s book *Roots* (1976) and the television miniseries sparked a nationwide fervor among Black Americans and others to learn more about Black Americans and their connection to Africa.

That passion was certainly reignited in the 2000s and 2010s as interest in DNA testing through companies like the Black-owned African Ancestry, allowing Black people, in particular, to see from which part of the African continent they may hail, exploded. So did interest in genealogy research, especially through online genealogy sites. Black scholar Henry Louis Gates proved this with the success of his 2006 PBS docuseries *African American Lives*, where he used DNA testing as well as historical

and genealogical research to connect the American and African lineages of such participants as Oprah Winfrey, Chris Tucker, and Whoopi Goldberg. In 2008, he followed it with *Finding Your Roots* and later began incorporating white Americans, too.

Although the nation as a whole appeared to have a thirst for their roots, this quest seemed to once again take on special significance for Black Americans, who, through more than two centuries of slavery, had been routinely robbed of a direct, continuous connection to their African heritage. But what has that quest for identity, belonging meant, especially in a country where it has been generally denied and suppressed? How does ignorance of Black American history contribute to the police killings of Black Americans like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice? Or to the Capitol Riot at the top of 2021? Why is Black Lives Matter even necessary in the 21st century and why are folks like Stacey Abrams fighting voter suppression?

Not knowing the contributions of Black Americans to overall American history isn't just a disservice to Black Americans. "I want American history taught," celebrated writer James Baldwin once demanded. "Unless I'm in the book, you're not in it either." This chapter presents a general overview of Black American history, underscoring its importance to Black Americans and *all* Americans.

A Peek at the Past

Perhaps no one individual did as much for the study and popularization of Black American history as Carter G. Woodson, the man responsible for Black History Month. Born in 1875 in Virginia to parents who were formerly enslaved, Woodson received his B.A. at Kentucky's Berea

College, his M.A. at the University of Chicago, and his Ph.D. at Harvard.

Woodson, who taught and led public schools even after receiving his graduate degrees, spearheaded the 1915 founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), presently the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), which began publishing what is now the *Journal of African American History*. After overseeing the organization for more than 30 years, Woodson passed away in 1950 at the age of 74, but the organization still stands and is more than 100 years old.



IN THEIR
OWN WORDS

Woodson believed that preserving Black American history was essential to Black American survival. “If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition,” Woodson reasoned. “It becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.” He also felt that omitting Black American contributions from general American history sanctioned and perpetuated racism. “The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching,” he noted. Looking at matters from this perspective, it’s little wonder that Black Americans have been vilified.

The only way to move forward is to recognize this reality. And that can only be done by acknowledging the history. The following sections examine some moments in Black history.

Life before slavery

“What is Africa to me?” Countee Cullen asks in his 1930 poem “Heritage.” It is a question that should resonate with more than just Black Americans. European interaction with the African continent profoundly changed the world — Black, white, and otherwise — and nowhere else is that fact more evident than in the United States.

With the exception of South Carolina, Africans were largely the racial minority in early America, partially because white colonists adamantly restricted their numbers. Even in small numbers, though, Africans had an enormous impact on American history. The truth is that America has a dual history rooted in both Europe and Africa. Despite what you see in many textbooks, Black American history didn’t begin with slavery; like other Americans, Black Americans have a beginning that predates the Americas.

Kidnapped Africans transported to the Americas through the slave trade generally hailed from Western and Central Africa, an area that includes present-day Ghana, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast (also known as Côte d'Ivoire), Mali, Senegal, Angola, and the Congo. Of Africa’s many empires, Ghana, Mali, and Songhay are the most important to Black American history. Some unique features of these empires included religious tolerance, attempts at representative government, and somewhat egalitarian attitudes concerning the contributions of women. [Chapter 2](#) provides more information about these empires.

Although Egypt attracted European attention centuries before the slave trade began, tales of Africa’s enormous riches reignited European interest in the continent. Portugal, which beat other European countries to Africa, didn’t go there to become enslavers but rather to gain

material wealth. And although the Portuguese captured Africans during those early trips, they weren't doomed to a lifetime of enslavement. Columbus's "discovery" of the New World and Spain's claim on the land changed that. When Spain instituted slavery to capitalize on cash crops like sugar, Portugal served as the primary supplier of Africans kidnapped from their homes. As [Chapter 3](#) explains, England entered the slave trade relatively late but excelled quickly.

Life before emancipation

The first Africans to arrive in Virginia to Point Comfort and, later, Jamestown in 1619 were brought in on slave ships. Historians of the past argued that these people weren't enslaved; however, when John Punch (believed to be an ancestor of Barack Obama on his mother's side and Nobel Prize winner Ralph Bunche) ran away from Virginia to Maryland with two indentured servants who were white in 1640, only he received a punishment of lifetime enslavement when captured. Still the evidence shows that Africans, by and large, never resigned themselves to being enslaved and kept trying for their freedom, either through running away, challenging their status in court, or trying to appeal to the moral consciences of colonists.

Enslaved life was harsh, with human beings reduced to nothing more than property. Laws ensured that those enslaved had no control over their lives. Slaveholders had the legal right to dictate their every move and mistreat them with no recourse. Consequently, slaveholders separated families without a second thought, and rapes and unwanted pregnancies were far from unusual occurrences for enslaved girls and women.

Still, free Blacks and their enslaved brethren never abandoned their hope for freedom. Whether they ran

away, rallied sympathetic white people toward emancipation or helped carry others to freedom using the Underground Railroad, they did whatever they could to force the new nation to live up to its promise of freedom and equality. Less than a century into the new nation's existence, the inevitable happened with the onset of the Civil War.

Life before civil rights

Long before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, Black Americans firmly set their minds on attaining freedom. When Lincoln wavered about ending slavery during the Civil War, Black Americans like Frederick Douglass continued lobbying for freedom.

Reconstruction (the period of recovery, particularly in the South, following the Civil War) revealed that most white Americans had never seriously entertained the idea of Black American freedom. Even some white abolitionists who believed that Black people shouldn't be enslaved didn't necessarily believe that they should enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other white people. White Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was the grand exception. He and others battled to right the wrongs of the past tied to slavery through various actions like proposing an amendment to the 1866 Freedmen's Bureau Bill for 40 acre lots for freedmen or supporting bills like the Civil Rights Act of 1866 declaring all men born in the country free with the aid of newly inaugurated Black American congressmen. White Southerners, evidenced by their subsequent push for poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and new state constitutions often excluding Black people, refused to change the status quo, and the North largely sat back and watched.

When Reconstruction ended, Black Americans continued the fight for racial equality as white mob violence compromised their freedom and Jim Crow ruled their lives determining where they could live, eat and socialize. In the 20th century, Black American leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett seized every opportunity to challenge the “white only” claim.

Searching for better jobs and freedom from Jim Crow, Black Americans migrated North. Although the Promised Land wasn’t all they had imagined, they didn’t abandon each other. Battling mob violence in the North, the nation saw that Black Americans never accepted lynching or Jim Crow; there wasn’t really a “New Negro” at work but rather the old one in plain view. Marcus Garvey capitalized on that spirit when he launched his brand of Black Nationalism and pan-Africanism. (You can read about Du Bois, Wells-Barnett, Garvey, and others, as well as the Great Migration, in [Chapter 7](#).)

The demographic shift created a new power base for Black Americans. Prompted by the shameful treatment Black Americans received during the Great Depression, Black leaders demanded a piece of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal program and switched from the Republican to the Democratic Party. By the time World War II rolled around, strong leaders, remembering the broken promises of World War I, wouldn’t back down from their new demands. By the 1950s and 1960s (see [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#)), the weapons critical to winning the battle against inequality were in place.



BLACK
AMERICAN
FACES

PROPHETS LOOKING BACKWARD: BLACK AMERICAN HISTORIANS

If, as German scholar Friedrich von Schlegel observed, “the historian is a backward-looking prophet,” then a number of prophets have emerged from Black American history. Celebrated Black American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the first Black American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, chose the African slave trade as the subject of his doctoral dissertation and in 1896 published *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America*. Twelve years prior to Du Bois’s work, in George Washington Williams, the first “colored” member of the Ohio legislature, published *History of the Negro Race in America From 1619 to 1880*.

Despite the scholarship of these men, Carter G. Woodson, the man frequently referenced as the Father of Black History, became one of the foremost advocates of Black American history. He wrote some of the most influential works on the Black American experience. He also established Negro History Week in 1926, which blossomed into Black History Month, with the hope that one day general American history would rightfully include the vital and numerous contributions of Black Americans.

Woodson didn’t do this solo and worked with historians Charles H. Wesley, with whom he wrote *The Negro in Our History* (1962), and Lorenzo Greene, with whom he wrote *The Negro Wage Earner* (1930), among others. Black historians who have continued Woodson’s push include the following:

- John Hope Franklin (1915–2009), author of arguably the most widely used Black American history textbook, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947)
- Lerone Bennett (1928–2018), former executive editor of *Ebony* magazine and author of *Before the Mayflower* (1963)
- John W. Blassingame (1940–2000), historian and Yale professor who authored several groundbreaking histories, including the 1972 *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press); it centered on the voices of Black people, most notably allowing enslaved people to be seen in their own history
- Sterling Stuckey (1932–2018), important historian who advanced the idea that Black people retained their African culture during slavery and impacted the rest of the nation primarily through his 1987