

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
Digital Library Collections

This is a PDF of a folder from our textual collections.

Collection: Duggin, Thelma P.: Files
Folder Title: Black History Month 1983
Box: 3

To see more digitized collections visit:

<https://reaganlibrary.gov/archives/digital-library>

To see all Ronald Reagan Presidential Library inventories visit:

<https://reaganlibrary.gov/document-collection>

Contact a reference archivist at: reagan.library@nara.gov

Citation Guidelines: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/citing>

National Archives Catalogue: <https://catalog.archives.gov/>

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

National Afro-American (Black) History Month
February 1983

Every American can be grateful to the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History for its dedicated efforts to promote both popular and scholarly interest in American black history. From 1915 forward this organization has served to familiarize our citizens with the outstanding contributions of black Americans. Through its work, we as a nation can more fully perceive the meaning of the events that have shaped our destiny.

The observance of Afro-American (Black) History Month affords all of us a fine opportunity to recognize further and to appreciate the role of black Americans in the development of our nation. This annual observance promotes heightened awareness of the significant participation of black citizens in every level and aspect of our national life. It is a time when we transcend past struggles for advancement and gratefully acknowledge our rich and valuable diversity. Our heritage lends strength to the fiber of our country.

Understanding black history is fundamental to a thorough comprehension of the full scope and sweep of the American historical experience. By more fully appreciating America's commitment to freedom and justice, we can avoid the mistakes of the past and fulfill the hopes of the future.

Ronald Reagan

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

National Afro-American (Black) History Month
February 1983

Every American can be grateful to the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History for its dedicated efforts to promote both popular and scholarly interest in American black history. From 1915 forward this organization has served to familiarize our citizens with the outstanding contributions of black Americans. Through its work, we as a nation can more fully perceive the meaning of the events that have shaped our destiny.

The observance of Afro-American (Black) History Month affords all of us a fine opportunity to recognize further and to appreciate the role of black Americans in the development of our nation. This annual observance promotes heightened awareness of the significant participation of black citizens in every level and aspect of our national life. It is a time when we transcend past struggles for advancement and gratefully acknowledge our rich and valuable diversity. Our heritage lends strength to the fiber of our country.

Understanding black history is fundamental to a thorough comprehension of the full scope and sweep of the American historical experience. By more fully appreciating America's commitment to freedom and justice, we can avoid the mistakes of the past and fulfill the hopes of the future.

Ronald Reagan

A Reader's Digest

REPRINT

Let's Set Black History Straight

An interview with WILLIAM LOREN KATZ



THE READER'S DIGEST • PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK

"If you believe that a man has no history worth mentioning, it's easy to assume that he has no humanity worth defending"

Let's Set Black History Straight

An interview with WILLIAM LOREN KATZ

Q. Mr. Katz, in recent months, campuses all over the nation have been in an uproar over student demands. One of the most vehement and persistent demands is that Negro history and culture be taught on a vastly expanded scale. Do you think this is justifiable?

A. I do. I think it's probably one of the most valid of the student protests. I hate to see it linked in people's minds with the more unreasonable demands of extremists, because the need for black history is great throughout our educational system.

Q. Why is it suddenly so important?

A. It has always been important. When you teach partial history, everybody loses. It's high time to teach the new generation of youngsters to avoid the ignorance, distortions and falsehoods of the past.

Q. In fairness to black citizens?

A. In fairness to all our citizens.

2

WILLIAM LOREN KATZ is author of last year's award-winning *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History* (Pitman), which the Negro Book Club has called "the best history book in print on the American Negro." He has served as consultant to the education departments of New York and North Carolina, and to the Smithsonian Institution. He is general editor of the Arno Press-New York Times reprint series, *The American Negro: His History and Literature*. For the past 15 years he has taught American history in New York City and Hartsdale, N.Y., high schools.

Certainly black people should know about the contributions that black individuals and black groups have made in the building of America. This is terribly important for their pride, their self-image, their self-esteem. But it's perhaps even more important for white people to know. For if you believe that a man has no history worth mentioning, it's easy to assume that he has no humanity worth defending. Let's face it: we have a major racial problem in this

country—and the only way we'll finally eradicate it is through education. Nothing else will destroy the stereotypes and myths that have been built up through the years.

Q. What sort of myths?

A. The chief myth is the conviction that since the Negro's accomplishments don't appear in the history books, he didn't have any. Most people are genuinely astonished when they learn that blacks sailed with Columbus, marched with Balboa and Pizarro and Cortés, fought side by side with white Americans in all our wars. They're amazed when you tell them about Phillis Wheatley, who learned English as a slave in Boston and wrote poetry so successfully that Voltaire praised her and George Washington asked her to come to see him. They never heard of Benjamin Banneker, a mathematician and surveyor who was appointed to the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson to the three-man commission that planned and laid out the city of Washington.

Q. Why has the black contribution been ignored by historians? Is it some kind of conspiracy?

A. Conspiracy is too harsh a word. But certainly there has been a tendency all along to treat the black man as if he were invisible. Paul Revere's famous drawing of the Boston Massacre shows a battle among whites, despite the fact that blacks were present and one leader, Crispus Attucks, a Negro, was among the five Americans shot down. Little has been written about the 5000 Ameri-

can Negroes who fought in the Revolution, but they were in every important battle. James Armistead, a slave, spied so successfully for Lafayette that the Frenchman asked the Virginia legislature to grant him his freedom—and it did. In the War of 1812, at least one out of every six men in the U.S. Navy was a Negro. At the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson had two battalions of free Negroes, all volunteers. In the Civil War, more than 200,000 black troops fought in the Union army and navy, and won 22 Medals of Honor.

Q. How, then, did the image of the Negro as a proud fighting man disappear?

A. To justify the hideous institution of slavery, slaveholders had to create the myth of the docile, slow-witted black, incapable of self-improvement, even contented with his lot. Nothing could be further from the truth. The slave fought for his freedom at every chance he got. There were numerous cases of successful uprisings on slave ships, and Nat Turner's plantation revolt of 1831 was only one of many. Yet the myth of docility has persisted.

Q. In what other areas has the truth been distorted or suppressed?

A. There are many. If I had to single out two, I think I'd choose the role of the black as an inventor, and then the part he played in the winning of the West. Most people have heard of George Washington Carver, who devised scores of new uses for the lowly peanut. But who

ever heard of Norbert Rillieux, who in 1846 invented a vacuum pan that revolutionized the sugar-refining industry by speeding up the mechanical process and making the sugar smooth and white? Or of Elijah McCoy, who in 1872 invented the drip cup that feeds oil to the moving parts of heavy machinery and who held more than 57 patents for other devices? How many know that Negroes are credited with inventing such diverse items as ice cream, the golf tee, potato chips, the player piano, the gas mask and the first traffic light? Not many!

As for the winning of the West, the black cowboy and the black frontiersman have been almost totally ignored. Yet in the typical trail crew of eight men that drove cattle up the Chisholm Trail, at least two were blacks. The black troopers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry composed one fifth of all the mounted troops assigned to protect the frontier after the Civil War—but you'd never know *that* from watching television!

Some people don't think these omissions are very important. Not long ago, a woman teacher asked me scornfully, "What difference do black *cowboys* make?" They make a great deal of difference. The cowboy is the archetype of American folk hero. Youngsters identify with him instantly. The average horse opera is really a kind of morality play, with good guys and bad guys, and right finally triumphing over wrong. You should see the amaze-

ment and relief on black youngsters' faces when they learn that their ancestors really had a part in all that.

Q. Does a whiff of this sort of knowledge stimulate their interest in learning in general?

A. It certainly does. One day, in one of my classes, I wrote on the blackboard that between 1870 and 1901 there were 22 Negroes in Congress, including two Senators from Mississippi. Immediately, a black youngster in the back row yelled out, "I don't believe it!" When he finally went to the library and found that I was right, he really came alive. Once considered a non-reader, he wrote a ten-page paper on the Negro in World War II, and another one on James Baldwin.

Q. What specific teaching changes would you recommend?

A. What we really need, from the earliest grades up through college and even into the postgraduate level, is preparation for life in a multi-racial society. For years, our elementary-school textbooks have depicted only white middle- or upper-middle-class children. We need teaching materials that reflect other aspects of American life, especially picture materials, because pictures convey ideas to youngsters far better than words.

At junior-high and high-school levels, we should start blending this material into courses on American history. Until this is done, it may be necessary to offer separate courses on black history. The problem often is how to motivate the white teach-

er. The old complaint that teaching materials aren't available is no longer valid: teachers' guides *are* available; the homework *has* been done. What we must do now is make teachers realize how exciting and stimulating all this fresh new material can be. If it causes a few sparks to fly in a classroom, why, so much the better! It's a lot more constructive to have a confrontation in a classroom, with the teacher as arbitrator, than to have it in the streets.

Q. What about college level?

A. At college level we can begin to specialize. African history, until recently, has been badly neglected. By the 15th century, for example, the kingdom of Songhay in West Africa had developed a banking system, a school system and a complete code of laws. Its university at Timbuktu offered courses in surgery, law and literature to scholars from Europe and Asia as well as from Africa.

I think a course on the so-called Negro Renaissance in Harlem during the 1920s, focusing on such black poets as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, could be just as rewarding as, say, a course on the English Lake-District poets of the 19th century.

Q. Do you agree with those who say that black history should be taught only by black teachers?

A. No, I don't. The color of your skin has nothing to do with your qualifications as a teacher.

Q. Why is this proposal made so often, then?

A. Look at the situation from the black point of view. If for generations you've been knocking on a door that won't open, you may easily become convinced that the keepers of the door are your enemies forever. Also, I think there's a feeling among some blacks that when whites and blacks get together in a joint effort the whites, sometimes more articulate or better educated, tend to take over. It's a psychological thing. Understandable, but in my opinion wrong.

Q. Do you think that college students should have a say in what courses are taught?

A. Let me answer that question this way. If I were a high-school principal or college dean, and students came to me with a demand for *any* legitimate body of knowledge, I would find it hard to turn them down. After all, the biggest problem that teachers generally face is student apathy. If they're already fired up with a hunger for knowledge, I'd be inclined to give three cheers and to make it available.

Q. In this whole area of black history, do you see any hopeful signs of progress?

A. Certainly. Rep. James H. Scheuer, of New York, has introduced a bill to establish a national commission on Afro-American history and culture. Many states, including Southern ones, now reject textbooks that don't reflect our pluralistic society. Magazines and other media are doing their part. The most hopeful sign of all, I think,

is the way youngsters devour this information. And why not? It's new, it's exciting—and it's *true*.

Q. What can the average parent do to help?

A. He can take an interest in his children's history books. If they're inadequate, he can complain. If they're honest, he can read them himself. He can be concerned about summer reading lists. He can try to get good books on black history into his public library. He can even donate such books himself.

It's really just a matter of replacing ignorance, and the prejudice that springs from ignorance, with knowledge. And what a painless and satisfying way to help solve racial conflict: read a book, digest its information, absorb its meaning, relive history—and discuss it all with friends. Surely that's better than

bricks or clubs in the streets!

Once, I remember, several youngsters stopped after class to discuss the topic that we had been studying. One of them, a white student, observed that after all the years of neglect it might be easy to fall into the error of exaggerating black achievements or contributions. A black youngster standing beside him spoke up. "There's no need for that," he said proudly. "The truth will do."

It's a phrase, I think, that might well be engraved over every classroom door and on every teacher's heart and mind. We need no more; we should not settle for less. *The truth will do.*

Reprints of this article are available. Prices, postpaid to one address: 10—50¢; 50—\$2; 100—\$3.50; 500—\$12.50; 1000—\$18. Address Reprint Editor, The Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, N.Y. 10570

15 Basic Books on Black History

- Great Negroes Past and Present*, Russell L. Adams (Afro-American, Chicago, 1964)
Before the Mayflower, Lerone Bennett, Jr. (Johnson, Chicago, 1962)
The Negro Caravan, Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Ulysses Lee (Editors) (Arno Press, New York, 1969)
The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Dubois (Crest, New York, 1961)
From Slavery to Freedom, John Hope Franklin (Knopf, New York, 1967)
Black Protest, Joanne Grant (Fawcett, Greenwich, Conn., 1968)
A Pictorial History of the Negro in America, Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer (Crown, New York, 1968)
Eyewitness: The Negro in American History, William Loren Katz (Pitman, New York, 1967)
The Making of Black America, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (Editors) (Atheneum, New York, 1969)
The Burden of Race, Gilbert Osofsky (Harper and Row, New York, 1967)
The Negro American, Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (Editors) (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1966)
The Negro in the Making of America, Benjamin Quarles (Collier, New York, 1964)
The Negro in the American Revolution, Benjamin Quarles (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1961)
A Layman's Guide to Negro History, Erwin A. Salk (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967)
The Negro in Our History, Carter G. Woodson and Charles H. Wesley (Associated, Washington, D.C., 1962)