

**The Negro a Factor in the History  
of the World**

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**Remarks of  
Hon. Arthur W. Mitchell**  
of Illinois  
in the  
**House of Representatives**

Wednesday, February 7, 1940

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REMARKS  
OF  
HON. ARTHUR W. MITCHELL

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Mr. MITCHELL. Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen of the House, hardly a day passes that some person in high authority, either in this House or in official capacity elsewhere, does not request of me information of some kind with reference to the achievement of the American Negro. Perhaps there is less actually known about the historical background of America's largest minority group—the Negro—than about any other minority group in this country. One searches our textbooks and literary records in vain for the real facts of Negro achievement, even in America. Little or no real facts concerning the Negro prior to the introduction of slavery in the American Colonies can be found in our books and periodicals used in our schools and colleges.

About a quarter of a century ago Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a scholar and historian of recognized ability, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The beginning was modest, but through the years this has become the outstanding organization of the world for the discovery, preservation, teaching, and the diffusion of important historical data and facts giving the true picture of Negro life in the past. Among the outstanding things which this organization is now doing I wish to mention the following: Publishes magazines, researches in Negro history, directs studies in clubs and schools, promotes the home study of the Negro by mail, produces texts on the Negro for schools and colleges, collects and preserves the valuable documents of Negro history, supplies libraries with special collections of rare books on the Negro, educates promising and enterprising young men for service in historical research, and for the last 15 years has developed Negro History Week.

In answer to the following letter which I wrote to Dr. Woodson a few days ago he sets forth in his letter to me, in a rather definite manner, the fine work this organization is doing:

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
Washington, D. C., February 3, 1940.

DR. CARTER G. WOODSON,  
*Director, The Association for the Study of Negro Life and  
History, Inc., 1538 Ninth Street NW., Washington, D. C.*

MY DEAR DR. WOODSON: For more than a decade I have watched with great interest and pride the fine work your association is doing in the way of preserving records pertaining to the history and achievement of the Negro in America and other countries. Because of misstatements of facts, often designedly made reflecting on the Negro, grave injustice has been done the race. Your organization

seeks to correct this, and is rendering a unique service not only to the Negro but to all lovers of truth and justice.

For 15 years the organization which you founded, and which you still direct, has, through schools, churches, and various institutions and organizations, celebrated Negro History Week. This celebration is fast becoming an established institution within itself. You will be interested to know that this year I have been invited to visit at least a dozen States, and to speak on more than 50 occasions during the celebration of Negro History Week, which I understand, begins February 11, ending February 18. It must be a source of gratification to you to note the growth of this splendid institution which you have founded, and to be able to see in your own day the tangible expressions of appreciation of peoples of all races and nationalities of the fine work you are doing.

I am asking you to please write me a letter, setting forth in succinct form the work which your organization seeks to do through Negro History Week. I am frank to tell you that I expect to use whatever statement you make on this subject in some of my talks during Negro History Week, and shall probably insert the same in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD as a matter of history for the coming generations.

Permit me to congratulate you, and to say that it has been a genuine pleasure to me to make whatever financial contributions I could to your splendid work, and to help you in this unique job in all other possible ways.

With best wishes, I am,  
Sincerely yours,

ARTHUR W. MITCHELL.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF  
NEGRO LIFE AND HISTORY, INC.,  
Washington, D. C., February 5, 1940.

HON. ARTHUR W. MITCHELL, M. C.,  
*United States House of Representatives, Washington, D. C.*

SIR: Replying to your inquiry, I desire to say that during Negro History Week we feature the work of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The aim of the association is to collect the records of the Negro and treat them scientifically in order that the race may not become a negligible factor in the thought of the world. The past of the Negro race has been so obscured and belittled by propagandists that little is known of its creditable record. Today, as a rule, we take notice of only the undesirable Negroes and ignore those who are struggling to climb upward. Few persons in public life today think of what the Negro has thought and felt and attempted and accomplished.

To direct the attention of the public to this long-neglected aspect of our history the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was organized in Chicago September 9, 1915, by Carter G. Woodson. This learned society publishes two magazines, researches in Negro history, directs studies in clubs and schools, promotes the home study of the Negro by mail, produces texts on the Negro for schools and colleges, collects and preserves the valuable documents of Negro history, supplies libraries with special collections of rare books on the Negro, and educates promising and enterprising young men for service in historical research. The various monographs and reports produced by this scientific body, as well as its two magazines, the Negro History Bulletin and the Journal of Negro History, are used throughout the country by schools and libraries.

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History finds by scientific investigation that the record of the Negro is not to be despised. Even in Africa the Negro race achieved much for which it has not been given credit. There are historians and anthropologists who say that the Africans first discovered the use of iron; first domesticated the sheep, goat, and cow; and first stimulated Europe toward fine art. Some have found among the Mossi in Africa what they consider the first evidence of trial by

jury. It is generally conceded that when Europeans first began to penetrate Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they found the natives as far advanced in their political and social organization as the Europeans themselves were in the ninth and tenth centuries. This the Africans had accomplished with little or no help from Asia or Europe. Evidences of this progress were found in the well-organized African kingdoms and empires like Ghana, Manding, Mossi, Songhay, Hausa, Bornu, Congo, Dahomey, Ashanti, Loango, Bechuana, Monomotapa, and Uganda.

Brought to Europe, the Negro even there demonstrated his capacity in spite of handicaps. Juan Latino excelled the scholars of Spain in Latin; Juan de Pareja won his way as a noted artist there, and so did Sebastian Gomez. Miguel Kapranizine became among the Portuguese such a theologian that they made him the vicar of the convent of Santa Barbara in Goa. Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges reached the high rank of a musician and soldier in France; Lislet Geoffroy distinguished himself there as a scientist; and General Dumas, the head of the great literary family of France, won laurels as a soldier in the defense of that land. Angelo Soliman stood out as a general in the service of the Holy Roman Empire. *Abram Hannibal, the grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, became one of the builders of modern Russia.* In Holland, J. E. J. Captein impressed scholars as a theologian and philosopher. A. W. Amo so moved the circle of scholars at Wittenberg that after taking his degree at that institution they made him a professor.

Later, when European explorers came to America, Negroes were with them to play a prominent part. In the discovery of the Pacific Ocean, Balboa carried with him 30 Negroes, including Nuflo de Olano. In the conquest of Mexico, Cortez was accompanied by a Negro, who, finding in his rations of rice some grains of wheat, planted them as an experiment and thus made himself the pioneer in wheat raising in the Western Hemisphere. Negroes assisted in the exploration of Guatemala and the conquest of Chile, Peru, and Venezuela. Negroes accompanied Ayllon in 1526 in his expedition from the Florida Peninsula northward and took a part in the establishment of the settlement of San Miguel, near what is now Jamestown, Va. Negroes accompanied Narvaez on his ill-fated adventure in 1526 and continued with Cabeza de Vaca, his successor, through what is now the southwestern part of the United States. There Estevanico, a Negro, discovered Cibola, the seven cities of the Zuni Indians. Matthew A. Henson, the last to appear in the role of explorer, was chosen by Commodore Peary to accompany him to the North Pole.

The first important contribution of the Negro to the development of America was toll. First as indentured servants and then after being debased to the status of slaves, Negroes supplied the demand for labor necessitated by the expansion of trade in the commercial revolution of the modern era. Negroes cleared the forests of our Southland, drained the swamps, prepared the soil for the production of its staples, and dug from the earth nuggets of precious metals. In that section, too, appeared Negro mechanics and artisans, using the skill which was natural to the African even in his native land. These Negro workers shod horses, cast farming implements, made vehicles, constructed boats, and built railroads, which provided the South with a network of transportation facilities.

While thus at toil the Negro showed inventive genius in producing labor-saving devices. Negroes assisted Eli Whitney in his experiments with the cotton gin and McCormick with his reaper. James Forten perfected a machine for handling sails; Henry Blair patented two corn harvesters; Granville T. Woods stimulated industry with his electrical patents; Elijah McCoy brought machinery nearer to perfection with his lubricating devices; Norbert Rillieux revolutionized the manufacture of sugar with his vacuum pan; and Jan E. Matzeliger revolutionized the shoe industry with the lasting device for making shoes with machinery.

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While helping to develop the country, the Negro has done his part in defending it. As a soldier, the Negro has acquitted himself with honor in all American wars. Negroes served with the Colonial forces on land and sea and helped to shape the destiny of America. Brave men of African blood followed the British standard during the Seven Years War until Montcalm was vanquished by Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, thereby making English institutions possible in America. During the struggle of the Colonies with the mother country, more than 3,000 other soldiers of African blood lived up to the record of heroism of Crispus Attucks on the Boston Commons; Peter Salem at Bunker Hill; Salem Poor at Charlestown; Pompey at Stony Point; Austin Dabney in Georgia; the 700 Negroes at Monmouth; and the daring regiment in the Battle of Rhode Island. Negro soldiers stood out with equal valor in the War of 1812. They fought bravely under Perry and Macdonough on the sea. Men of color came to Andrew Jackson's rescue in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, and by their bravery elicited from him highest praise for their defense of the land of their fathers.

In the Civil War 178,000 Negro soldiers convinced observers that they could not be excelled in maintaining the honor of the Nation, and therefore were entitled to the rights of citizens. Their fighting at Santiago in the Spanish-American War was all but wonderful. The Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth Infantry distinguished themselves at Carizal as the heroes of the hour. In the World War Negro troops and officers acquitted themselves with honor.

The Negro is a natural artist. He has the gift of producing things useful and pleasing to the eye. He has, therefore, been accredited with achievement in both the industrial and fine arts. Numerous implements, utensils, weapons, musical instruments, and personal adornments made by the natives of Africa show expert workmanship and exceptional skill. In the fine arts the African has left such striking evidences of his aesthetic development in the Sherbro figures, the Megaliths of Gambia, the bronze sculptures of Benin, and the ornate productions of the Congo. In the tombs of their kings, on the ornamented vessels, and on stones of the highlands have been left other striking evidences of this art. The solutric rock painting on the cliffs of South Africa shows an ideal of beauty as expressed by a most fertile imagination. In America, Edward M. Bannister was painting with success before the Civil War; at the same time Edmonia Lewis was working toward renown as a sculptor; and since their day Henry O. Tanner has made a place for himself among the most distinguished of all American painters. With the promising efforts of William Edward Scott, William A. Harper, A. A. Motley, J. L. Wells, Lois M. Jones, J. L. Porter, and Aaron Douglass in painting, and with the advance of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, May Howard Jackson, and Augusta Savage in sculpture, we are assured that the American Negro is standing on the threshold of great things in fine arts.

This same productive imagination is evident in the striking poetry produced by Negroes even when in primitive condition in their native land. In the folklore, the charming tales handed down from sire to son, in Africa is found evidence of this same art in tender and gracious touches. Art is found also in the very telling of these stories with a wealth of descriptive detail in a sort of recitative chanting and crooning very much like a song. Taken abroad and taught the means of expression in modern languages the African exhibited this poetical power in a manner which Americans and Europeans can better understand in reading the productions of James Weldon Johnson and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

In dramatic art the Negro has also given a good account of himself. The Negro is naturally an actor. Inasmuch as he has never permitted his mind wholly to dominate his body, he finds expression much easier than in the case of other people. What other theatrical persons have to spend years in acquiring the Negro exhibits spontaneously. In the story telling and the folk drama of Africa the actors are most original in the imitation of things in

their respective environments. There is that frequent imitation of the voice of the thing impersonated, admirable use of gestures, which sometimes show as many as three simultaneous motions of the body. Of the many persons who have undertaken to imitate the Negro on the stage none has as yet been able to manifest that art to take the place of the Negro in the histrionic sphere, although racial antagonism has often supplanted the Negro elsewhere. Ira Aldridge, Richard B. Harrison, and Paul Robeson are cases in evidence.

Of the value of Negro music, the testimony is almost universal. Even in his untutored condition, the slave sang his "canticles of love and woe," chanted wildly in that darkness which only a few rays of light brightened. This was a significant contribution, an art still lacking appreciation but getting a hearing now and then from persons who have sufficient penetration to enter the soul of an oppressed people. Clothed in their primitive dignity, these spirituals are now being understood as artists are beginning to direct their attention on this important background of the Negro. Marion Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Caterina Yarborough have demonstrated what the Negro can do in this art.

Attention to this spiritual side of the Negro has been productive of a keener appreciation of the art of the Negro. It has tended also to invite attention to the unexplored background of the race, to discover whether or not there may be other contributions of the Negro to civilization. The result has been first to force scientists to revise their estimate as to the Negro, who has long been regarded as an inferior. A few years ago investigators accordingly began to say that although the Negro did not reach a high stage of development in other respects, he did excel in art. Further investigation has convinced these same thinkers that they should revise this opinion again so as to say that the Negro not only reached a high level of culture in art but that he made valuable contributions in other spheres. This last effort has required a sweeping revision of the former estimate of the Negro to the extent of considering him as being equal to others belonging to the family of mankind.

Since the days of emancipation the Negro has measured up to the highest expectations. Toward this end the race was greatly stimulated by that matchless orator and sane statesman, Frederick Douglass. During the reconstruction the Negro gave a good account of himself as a citizen and as a statesman. The majority of the Negro leaders of that day advocated high ideals. The participation of the Negro in the affairs of the Government was denounced and opposed from the very beginning; but despite the mire of corruption into which the Negroes were drawn by the white men who profited thereby at the expense of the freedmen, the race decisively demonstrated its capacity for citizenship and its right to all of the honors within the gift of the Nation. The Negro has never imposed upon the Government such colossal evils as the "credit mobilier," the "whisky ring," the Tweed ring, and the "star-route frauds."

The achievements of the Negro in freedom have been all but wonderful. Under the leadership of one of the greatest educators of all time, Booker T. Washington, American Negroes have met the most rigid test of civilization in first acquiring material things and thus permanently attaching themselves to the communities in which they live. In proportion to their population Negroes constitute a larger percentage of those gainfully employed than any other element of the country. Negroes now own a million farms, 31 percent of those employed have gone into industry; and in spite of their low wages, lack of credit, and handicaps have built homes, churches, and schools worth more than \$2,000,000,000. In the effort to facilitate labor and to increase the comforts of life this race has given the world that universally known agricultural chemist, George Washington Carver.

In teaching the history of the Negro, however, we do not mean to dim the luster of any star in our firmament. We should not learn less of George Washington, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen"; but we should learn something also of the 3,000 Negro soldiers of the American Revolution who helped to make this Father of Our Country possible. We should not fail to appreciate the unusual contribution of Thomas Jefferson to freedom and democracy; but we should invite attention also to one of his outstanding contemporaries, Benjamin Bannaker, the mathematician, astronomer, and advocate of a world peace. We should in no way detract from the fame of Perry on Lake Erie or Jackson at New Orleans in the second struggle with England; but we should remember the black men who assisted in winning these victories on land and sea. We should not cease to pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln as the savior of the country; but we should ascribe praise also to the 178,000 Negroes who had to be mustered into the service of the Union before it could be preserved, and who by their heroism demonstrated that they were entitled to freedom and citizenship. We should in no way whatever withhold assistance from the effort to make the world safe for democracy, but we should teach our citizenry history rather than propaganda and thus make this country safe for all elements of the population at home.

Respectfully yours,

C. G. WOODSON, *Director.*

If we are to have genuine democracy in our country, our largest minority group must come in for its proper consideration, recognition, and credit, as well as for its responsibilities and contributions in the form of work, taxes, war burdens and risks. I observe with much interest and satisfaction that as we draw away from the bitter days following the close of the War and reconstruction in the South, the growing tendency among the people of the dominant race to be more tolerant and considerate toward this minority group. In many parts of the country Negro History Week is being celebrated not only by the colored school but by thousands of white schools, whose pupils are realizing more and more the necessity of a knowledge of all of our people.

There is no more striking evidence of this growth of racial interest on the part of the white citizens of this country than the rapidly changing attitude of the white press. The great metropolitan daily newspapers and hundreds of magazines published throughout the Nation have joined with Dr. Woodson and others in their effort to give the world the proper information with reference to the Negro. There was a time when the Negro had to commit some sort of heinous crime in order to have his name appear on the front page of a newspaper and in the editorial columns. Thank God, this is no longer true. It is no unusual thing now to find the Negro favorably mentioned in the headlines of our newspapers, and to find scores of magazines carrying creditable accounts of Negro endeavor and achievement. In this, democracy is taking a firm root and is growing as the time passes. This is our hope. It is the hope of the Nation, because it is true now as always that righteousness exalteth a nation; injustice is a reproach upon any people.

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