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Fresh Focus: Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

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Fresh Focus

Too often the pressure of the present-day work environment lures archivists into ignoring their professional past or advancing shortsightedly into the future. To encourage such reflection on the archival enterprise, Provenance launches a new feature in this issue, Fresh Focus. This series of occasional essays opens with a survey of Carter Woodson’s pioneering efforts to collect the history of African Americans written by Eric N. Johnson, a student in the archival program at the University of Texas.

We invite contributors to explore neglected chapters in archival history or to share an original, especially historical, perspective on the current world of archival affairs. Provenance particularly encourages submissions for Fresh Focus from new or student archivists who are, after all, the future of the profession.

Editorial staff will appraise submissions in terms of appropriateness to the guidelines set forth for inclusion in Provenance’s Fresh Focus section. Please address submissions or questions to the Fresh Focus editor, David B. Gracy II, at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, SZB 564, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1276; (512) 471-3892. E-mail: gracy@gslis.utexas.edu

The Editors

Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

Eric N. Johnson

Eighty-four years ago, in a year fraught with racial tension, Carter G. Woodson created a bold organization dedicated to providing a cultural and historical framework for African American studies. Earlier that year, in an attempt to counteract D. W. Griffith's damaging portrayal of black-white relations in his recent film The Birth of a Nation, University of Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park held a conference “to interest southern whites in collecting black folklore.” Woodson had declined Parks’s invitation to speak at the conference, on the basis that he was not a folklorist, but

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added that he soon "planned to start an organization devoted to the preservation and dissemination of historical and sociological information on the Negro race." On 9 September 1915 he launched the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to discover, evaluate, and provide a solid scientific foundation of primary and secondary documentation to counter the research conducted to date, research which in large part had dismissed African Americans as a passive, weak, and thoughtless race that had been overwhelmed by the strength and intellect of Western culture.

To understand the importance of the organization that proved invaluable to the study of African American history and culture, it is necessary first to understand the motivation and drive of its founder. Termed by many "The Father of Black History," Woodson strove throughout his life to uncover and reveal the truth and value of the African American presence in the United States. Founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, the Journal of Negro History, and Negro History Week, he also established the Carter G. Woodson Collection at the Library of Congress and made an indelible mark as a prolific researcher, collector, and writer of African American history and culture.

Woodson's birth at a time—in 1875—that has been called the nadir of the black experience in America had shaped his outlook and ambition, driving him to examine and promote the African American's place in history. Prior to his entrance into Douglass High School in Huntington, West Virginia, at the age of twenty-five, Woodson spent his life laboring on the railroad and in the mines. From that early experience he viewed education above all else as the tool by which to achieve his desire and ambition for respect. In 1926 he would write: "If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile

tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated."

"Enrolling at Harvard University to obtain his doctorate, he attended the lectures of professors Ephraim Emerton, Charles Gross, Roger Merriman, William Munro, and, most outstanding, Edward Channing, a scientific historian who stressed original sources and objectivity, principles Woodson later ceaselessly inculcated among his researchers." In 1912 Woodson became the second African American in the United States to receive a doctoral degree in the field of history. In 1914 he became a member of the American Negro Academy, "... a selective organization ... to promote the publication of scholarly work and to collect the works of black authors and archival materials."4

Woodson's staunch individualism and social conviction soon led him to the conclusion that however positive the academy's influence might be on academia, its elite membership did not have a broad enough impact on the general African American and white populations. In 1915 Woodson's dissatisfaction with the academy's elitism combined with the impact of D.W. Griffith's offensive portrayal of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* to create an energy out of which emerged the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Although he started with only four hundred dollars, Woodson intended to reach a much broader audience than the American Negro Academy. Disregarding advice from all quarters, he deliberately kept the price of the association's publication, the *Journal of Negro History*, low. At twenty-five cents per issue he hoped to encourage academics and non-academics alike to subscribe

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4 Ibid., 8.
and participate in the budding association. According to Woodson biographer Jacqueline Goggin,

The major objective of Woodson's research program was to correct the racist bias in the work published by white scholars. To accomplish this goal Woodson and his assistants uncovered previously unknown source materials, asked different questions of source materials used by white scholars, and developed new historical and sociological research methods. By using new sources and methods, Woodson and his assistants pioneered in writing the social history of black Americans and moved away from interpreting blacks solely as victims of white oppression and racism. Instead, blacks were seen as major actors in American history.5

This Herculean effort to provide a cultural and historical framework for African American studies brought to light records and manuscripts previously overlooked by the majority of scholars. Woodson led the association's efforts to uncover and preserve the social records of common individuals and helped pave the road for the work of future archivists, historians, and students. The association's work with census records, tax records, personal and financial documents, diaries, and other materials revealed a wealth of information about the accomplishments and lives of slaves, tradesmen, clergymen, abolitionists, indentured servants, and countless other unsung groups. The creation of this large body of organized documentation and the rigorous analysis performed on it catalyzed subsequent research ranging from African American culture to slavery to the history of the South.

5 Ibid., 67.
In 1922 Woodson published *The Negro in Our History*, an investigation of free blacks in antebellum America based primarily on the 1830 federal census. The creative use to which he put that and other source material pushed the association, and particularly himself as its leader, to the cutting edge of scholarly research. The association demonstrated that history could indeed be written about non-elite segments of society. After the study was published, "scholars realized that a vast potential for social history research lay in census manuscripts."\(^6\)

Using census data, marriage registers, birth and death certificates, letters, diaries, and oral histories, these scholars pointed to the positive achievements and contributions of Afro-Americans during the adverse conditions of slavery. Only recently have historians adopted the methods and sources for research data first used by Woodson and other scholars who published in the *Journal of Negro History*. Indeed, during the last twenty years both black and white historians of Afro-American history have had to rediscover the methods as well as the content of the work done by the pioneering generation of black scholars.\(^7\)

Negro History Week celebrations, established by Dr. Woodson and the association in 1926, featured exhibits of primary sources to encourage the public to donate documents in their possession for preservation and use in historical archives. "The outstanding success of this venture brought him

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\(^6\) Goggin, *A Life in Black History*, 360.  
\(^7\) Jacqueline Goggin, "Countering White Racist Scholarship: Carter G. Woodson and the *Journal of Negro History*," *Journal of Negro History* 68 (4): 360.
the Spingarn Medal, [and] W. E. B. DuBois stated that Woodson had performed the most striking piece of scientific work for the Negro race in the last ten years of anyone he knew." Fifty years later Negro History Week evolved into Black History Month, now widely celebrated throughout the United States. This outgrowth of the efforts of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and of Dr. Woodson in particular, continues to encourage people from all walks of life to donate records of African American achievement and history so that future generations will have access to their past.

After 1926 the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History continued to collect and research a wide variety of primary source material under Dr. Woodson's guidance. In spite of a gradual loss of funding for the association and the Journal, Woodson proceeded with his efforts at a breakneck pace. In 1928 he applied for a grant from the Social Science Research Council with the argument: "If such a tremendous amount [of primary source material] could be collected without funding . . . even more could be accomplished if paid field workers were sent into the rural South to collect sociological data and historical documents." The next year the Social Science Research Council granted the association a one-year sum of four thousand dollars, which it used to collect over 2,500 southern manuscripts and records.

In Woodson's 1943-1944 Annual Report to the Journal of Negro History, he stated gloomily that "research during the war had been greatly handicapped, there was an acute shortage of workers, and a much reduced staff, and the association could not compete with the high salaries offered

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8 Scally, A Bio-Bibliography, 13.
by the government.” Travel was restricted during this period, and most of the association’s efforts involved “exploiting the few untouched sources” on Africa. However, the association continued to collect, preserve, study, and promote its findings, and the impact of the groundbreaking work done by Woodson and his colleagues continued to grow.

On 3 April 1950 at the age of seventy-four, Dr. Carter G. Woodson died unexpectedly in the night. The success of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in researching, collecting, and organizing historical materials documenting the African American experience and its struggle to disseminate its findings throughout the country helped to orient archival collecting and to overhaul traditional historical research, thereby laying the foundation for a more honest and thorough understanding of American culture than any previously available. Woodson biographer Sister Anthony Scally later concluded that the demand for black studies in colleges and universities in the 1960s “owed its impetus to his unremitting and zealous emphasis upon the importance of spreading the truth about the African and Afro-American background, and the use in elementary and high schools all over the country of his black history texts.”

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11 Ibid., 17.
12 Ibid., 19.