



American Corner

Universidad de Tarapacá

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Americans Celebrate Black History Month

Originally established as Negro History Week in 1926 by Carter G. Woodson, a noted African-American author and scholar, this event evolved into the establishment of February as "Black History Month" in 1976. This commemoration also has been referred to as "African-American History Month." Both names are currently in use.

When Woodson established Negro History week, he realized the importance of providing a theme to focus the attention of the public. The intention never has been to dictate or limit the exploration of the Black experience, but to bring to the public's attention important developments that merit emphasis.

Since 1926, The Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History (ASALH) has established the national theme for the month-long celebration. The National Theme for the celebration in the year 2007 is "From Slavery to Freedom: The Story of Africans in the Americas."

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad, a vast network of people who helped fugitive slaves escape to the North and to Canada, was not run by any single organization or person. Rather, it consisted of many individuals -- many whites but predominantly blacks -- who knew only of the local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation. Still, it effectively moved hundreds of slaves northward each year -- according to one estimate, the South lost 100,000 slaves between 1810 and 1850.

An organized system to assist runaway slaves seems to have begun towards the end of the 18th century. In 1786 George Washington complained about how one of his runaway slaves was helped by a "society of Quakers, formed for such purposes." The system grew, and around 1831 it was dubbed "The Underground Railroad," after the then emerging steam railroads. The system even

used terms used in railroading: the homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat

were called "stations" and "depots" and were run by "stationmasters," those who contributed money or goods were "stockholders," and the "conductor" was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next.



Harriet Tubman

For the slave, running away to the North was anything but easy. The first step was to escape from the slaveholder. For many slaves, this meant relying on his, or her, own resources. Sometimes a "conductor," posing as a slave, would enter a plantation and then guide the runaways northward. The fugitives would move at night. They would generally travel between 10 and 20 miles to the next station, where they would rest and eat, hiding in barns and other out-of-the-way places. While they waited, a message would be sent to the next station to alert its stationmaster.

The fugitives would also travel by train and boat -- conveyances that sometimes had to be paid for. Money was also needed to improve the appearance of the runaways -- a black man, woman, or child in tattered clothes would invariably attract suspicious eyes. This money was donated by individuals and also

raised by various groups, including vigilance committees.

Vigilance committees sprang up in the larger towns and cities of the North, most prominently in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. In addition to soliciting money, the organizations provided food, lodging and money, and helped the fugitives settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation.

The Underground Railroad had many notable participants, including John Fairfield in Ohio, the son of a slaveholding family, who made many daring rescues, Levi Coffin, a Quaker who assisted more than 3,000 slaves, and Harriet Tubman, who made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom.



Super Bowl XL



Super Bowl Breaks Ground with First Black Coaches

Washington – Even though the winner of Super Bowl 41 was not to be decided until February 4, in Miami, one result was already in: the victorious head coach of American professional football's championship game was going to be African American.

As probably every pro football fan now knows, 2007 marks the first time that a Super Bowl will have a black head coach. What makes it even more of a front-page story is that this year's Super Bowl will have two black head coaches: Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts and Lovie Smith of the Chicago Bears.

Best friends off the playing field, they will square off in the crowning game of the National Football League (NFL) season.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has told reporters that football is America's "pastime that brings people together across

social lines, across racial lines." "It's an important American institution," said Rice, whose favorite NFL team is the Cleveland Browns because its games were broadcast in her home town of Birmingham, Alabama.

Cyrus Mehri, a Washington lawyer who helped bring about diversity in NFL hiring practices, believes the significance of black head coaches in the Super Bowl transcends sports. "There's no question that having Super Bowl teams with black head coaches for the first time will have a huge impact" on all of American society, Mehri told *USINFO* January 29.

MAKING HISTORY

Mehri is co-author, with the late attorney Johnnie Cochran, of a 2002 report called "Black Coaches in the National Football League" that served as a catalyst for a new rule requiring NFL teams to interview at least

one minority candidate for head coaching positions.

The rule led to the hiring of seven minority head coaches in the NFL by 2006, out of 32 teams in the league. The modern-day NFL did not have a black head coach until Art Shell was hired by the Oakland Raiders in 1989, yet in the 2006 season about 70 percent of the players were black.

Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard was the NFL's first African-American head coach, when he played and coached for the Akron (Ohio) Pros in the American Professional Football League, which in 1922 was renamed the National Football League.

In honor of Pollard, a group called the Fritz Pollard Alliance was created in 2003 to represent minority coaches and to promote diversity and equality of job opportunity in the coaching, administrative and scouting staffs of NFL teams.



Indianapolis Colts head coach Tony Dungy, right, chats with quarterback Peyton Manning.

ALTERING THE AMERICAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Mehri, the alliance's counsel, said having both Dungy and Smith as head coaches in the Super Bowl will alter the American "consciousness" regarding the ability of African Americans to "lead very complex [team] organizations in the biggest game in the American culture."

Among their many duties, NFL head coaches supervise a 53-man playing roster and numerous assistant coaches, organize practices and are the ultimate decision-makers for their

team's performance during the 16-game regular season.

Mehri sees a "ripple effect" spreading well beyond sports from having black head coaches in the Super Bowl. Mehri says that what he experiences in his law firm, Mehri & Skalet, representing female and minority employees in discrimination cases, is indicative of the business world, where some companies have a "bias in hiring minorities for true leadership positions."

"These guys [Smith and Dungy] are not players; they are the ones running the operations, and I think it will open the door to promoting minority candidates in the NFL, and also outside of sports," said Mehri.

Harry Carson, a Hall of Fame NFL player for the New York Giants, echoed Mehri's comments. Carson, now executive director of the Washington-based Fritz Pollard Alliance, told *USINFO* January 29 that "one by one" barriers are being broken in the NFL.

Carson, who played "linebacker" from 1976 to 1988, cited Mike Tomlin, hired January 22 as the new head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers, as an example of how the NFL rule on minority hiring has enabled blacks to move up the career ladder. Tomlin, a black assistant coach for the Minnesota Vikings, was not considered head coaching material until his interview with the Steelers hierarchy convinced the Pittsburgh team to hire him for its top coaching job, said Carson.

Perhaps the Bears' Lovie Smith best expressed the meaning of Black History Month, commemorated each February in the United States, when he said he looked forward to the day when it is no longer news that a Super Bowl team is coached by an African American.

Colts defensive end Dwight Freeney echoed that sentiment. Freeney, an African American, told reporters that, while thrilled by the success of black coaches reaching the

Super Bowl, “I hope we get to the point

[when] we don’t have to hear about it.”

First Muslim Elected to the U.S. Congress

Washington – Democrat Keith Ellison won a closely watched Minnesota congressional race November 7, making him the first Muslim to be elected to the U.S. Congress.

Ellison also is the first black congressman elected from Minnesota. He will fill the seat being vacated by retiring Democratic Representative Martin Sabo.

“I think the most important thing about this race is we tried to pull people together on things we all share, things that are important to everyone,” he said in his victory speech. “We were able to bring in Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists.”

Ellison, a two-term state legislator before his run for Congress, has opposed the war in Iraq, and has advocated universal health care for Americans.

Even though he is an observant Muslim, Ellison has not made religion a feature of his campaign.

“People draw strength and moral courage from a variety of religious traditions. Mine have come from both Catholicism and Islam. I was raised Catholic and later became a Muslim while attending Wayne State University. I am inspired by the Quran’s message of an encompassing divine love, and a deep faith guides my life everyday,” he wrote in an article for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

“I think it’s time for the United States to see a moderate Muslim voice, to see a face of Islam that is just like everybody else’s face,” he said recently.

Born in Detroit, Ellison received his law degree at the University of Minnesota in

Minneapolis, where he practices law and where he has lived for the past 17 years. He converted to Islam at the age of 19, saying that as a young man he was outraged by racism and injustice.

Ellison described himself at that age as an angry young social activist, but “I eventually realized that it is easy to be a critic pointing out problems and failings, but it is a far more difficult thing to be part of creating the solution.” He credits his family for steering him onto the right path.

“I began to help create a world where everybody counts and where there are no throwaway people,” he said.

He has a reputation as a bridge-builder, reaching across partisan divides to achieve results. He champions liberal causes, supports raising the minimum wage, environmental protection, abortion rights and increased funding for education.

“Ellison’s election is a good sign for America,” University of Minnesota professor and analyst Lawrence Jacobs told the *Washington File*. “Muslims who may have been feeling persecuted or locked out of American society will feel a more hopeful side of American society.”

He said it is encouraging for Muslims abroad, also, because it signals willingness to entertain other views. “American diversity works to our advantage with Muslims in positions of political power,” he said.

Although the Midwest often is seen as a conservative bastion, Jacobs said, “Openness is a historical legacy and tradition in the Midwest.” Important civil rights leaders

emerged from Minnesota, he added. "Everyone gets a chance on their own record, without regard to race and creed," he said. "It is a tolerant society."

American Muslims welcomed Ellison's victory. Corey Saylor, director of the Council

on Islamic Relations, said in a November 8 statement, "The election of an American Muslim candidate to national office and the rejection of those who promoted societal division and mistrust send a clear message that the United States is a nation that embraces people of all faiths."

"Ain' t I A Woman?" - Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth, born in about 1797, was a woman of remarkable intelligence despite her illiteracy. Truth had great presence. She was tall, some 5 feet 11 inches (1.79m). Her voice was low, so low that listeners sometimes termed it masculine, and her singing voice was beautifully powerful. Whenever she spoke in public, she also sang. No one ever forgot the power of Sojourner Truth's singing, just as her wit and originality of phrasing were also memorable.



Sojourner Truth: ex-slave and fiery abolitionist, figure of imposing physique, riveting preacher and spellbinding singer who dazzled listeners with her wit and originality. Straight-talking and unsentimental, Truth became a national symbol for strong black women--indeed, for all strong women. She was a complex woman who was born into slavery and died a legend. Inspired by religion, Truth transformed herself from a domestic servant named Isabella into an itinerant, pentecostal preacher; her words of empowerment have inspired black women and

poor people the world over to this day. As an abolitionist and a feminist, Truth defied the notion that slaves were male and women were white, expounding a fact that still bears repeating: among blacks there are women; among women, there are blacks.

Sojourner Truth gave her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. (The women's rights movement grew in large part out of the anti-slavery movement.) Several ministers attended the second day of the Woman's Rights Convention, and were not shy in voicing their opinion of man's superiority over women. One claimed "superior intellect", one spoke of the "manhood of Christ," and still another referred to the "sin of our first mother (Eve)."

Suddenly, Sojourner Truth rose from her seat in the corner of the church.

"For God's sake, Mrs. Gage, *don't* let her speak!" half a dozen women whispered loudly, fearing that their cause would be mixed up with Abolition (anti-slavery). Sojourner walked to the podium and slowly took off her sunbonnet. Her six-foot frame towered over the audience. She began to speak in her deep, resonant voice:

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?



That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes'

rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

Welcome Back to the American Corner!

First we would like to welcome everyone back to the UTA and the American Corner. We are very excited to get busy with our weekly activities and special events. There are a lot of interesting things being planned, and we will be announcing them to the public very soon. This is our daily schedule:

Monday through Friday: 10:00 – 13:00 and 15:00 – 18:00.

If you have any comments or question, or just want to come and visit, we are located on the 2nd floor of the Anexo to the Biblioteca Central. You can also contact us by email (americancorner@uta.cl) or by phone (58 205 929). We look forward to seeing you soon!

Webchats: This is an opportunity to watch on-line discussions with experts in a number of different topics. Read the comments of the expert and send them questions in real time. It works a lot like a normal chat room. This is a good opportunity to broaden your horizons and practice your English! Check out the webpage at <http://webchat.state.gov/>. Some upcoming webchats are:

- March 14: Foreign Policy Perspectives: How U.S. Conservatives, Progressives and Moderates Are Finding Common Ground
http://usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/USINFO/Products/Webchats/lagon_shorr_14_mar_2007.html
- March 15: Celebrating Women's History Month: How American Women Fought for the Vote
http://usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/USINFO/Products/Webchats/cooney_15_mar_2007.html
- March 20: Democracy Dialogues: Why Democracy Matters to an Economist
http://usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/USINFO/Products/Webchats/siegle_20_mar_2007.html

In March, We Celebrate...

Inauguration of International Polar Year – March 1st

National Women's Month

National Red Cross Month

Alamo Day – March 6th

Peace Corps Day – March 7th

Daylight Savings Time Begins – March 11th

St. Patrick's Day – March 17th

Sources for this Newsletter

*some of the selections may have been edited for content and length

Americans Celebrate Black History Month

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The Underground Railroad

- www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html

Super Bowl XL: Superbowl Breaks Ground with First Black Coaches

- usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=January&x=200701311335261xEnerG2.396792e-02

First Muslim Elected to U.S. Congress

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"Ain't I A Woman?" - Sojourner Truth

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