

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

© J. S. Paluch Co., Inc.

FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH

The U.S. celebrates Black History Month in February to honor African-Americans' achievements and contributions to society. People and organizations across the country hold events to recognize pioneers such as Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall and Jackie Robinson. In its earliest form, the tradition is almost 90 years old, but some people don't know its origins. Historian Carter G. Woodson established Negro History Week, which began Feb. 12, 1926. He scheduled it at that time to match up with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In 1976, Negro History Week became Black History Month. President Gerald Ford urged the public to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history," according to the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies.

DID YOU KNOW?

Recent counts put the black population of the U.S. at 45 million. New York has the highest number of black residents, with 3.7 million, while Washington has the highest proportion of African-Americans, with 51 percent.

There are 46 black members in the 114th Congress, the Hill reported. The first black senator was Hiram Rhodes Revels, who represented Mississippi from 1870 to 1871, and the first black congresswoman was Shirley Chisholm, who represented New York during seven terms.

"The Renaissance" was the name of the first black professional basketball team. They were nicknamed the Rens and once won an amazing 88 consecutive games.

Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania, became the first degree-granting historically black university in 1854. Now, the U.S. has 106, including Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Spellman and Morehouse in Atlanta, Xavier and Dillard Universities in New Orleans and Howard University in Washington, D.C.

The first black astronaut was Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., but he died before he could travel to space. The first black astronaut in space was Guion Bluford in 1983.

A portion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have A Dream" speech was improvised. At one point, he pushed his papers aside and "turned his speech into a sermon," PBS noted. "All of a sudden, this thing came to me that I have used -- I'd used it many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream' -- and I just felt that I wanted to use it here," King said later.

Potato chips were invented by a black man. In 1853, a restaurant customer sent his French fries back to the kitchen because they were too thick. The chef, George Crum, cut a bunch of potatoes as thin as he could, fried them crisp in anger and, voila, the potato chip was born, according to howstuffworks. The golf tee, gas mask and modern blood bank were also invented by African Americans.

The first black Nobel Peace Prize winner was Ralph J. Bunche, who won in 1950 for his mediation efforts in Palestine. The first black Oscar winner was Hattie McDaniel for her portrayal of Mammy in "Gone with the Wind." She won as best supporting actress.

Robert Abbott became the first black millionaire after he founded the weekly newspaper, the Chicago Defender, in 1905. BET founder Robert L. Johnson became the first black billionaire in 2000.

Black Saints

St. Benedict the Moor: Born a slave near Messina, Italy, St. Benedict the Moor was freed by his masters and eventually settled in Monte Pellegrino, Italy. Before an uprising that led to reform catapulted St. Benedict to serve as superior of the St. Mary convent, he cooked for the parish. Many were excited by the prospect of seeing a former cook and would flock to see the saint who had a reputation for miracles. St. Benedict died at the convent and was canonized in 1807, becoming the Patron Saint for Blacks in the U.S.

St. Augustine (Augustine of Hippo): While there are disputes as to whether St. Augustine was Black, we do know he was African. Viewed as one of the most important and influential Church Fathers of his time, St. Augustine first learned about God and Christianity from his [mother](#), Monica. Born in Teggaste, Africa (present day Algeria) in 384, St. Augustine was highly educated and was considered a genius after having studied in Africa, the University of Carthage, and Rome. He lived an austere life and performed great acts of mortification and penance, but St. Augustine made a profound impact on the Early Church. Having written over a thousand letters and sermons and more than 250 books, St. Augustine is perhaps best known for two of his more popular works, “Confessions” and “City of God,” both of which are still read to this day

St. Josephine Bakhita: Kidnapped from her home in Sudan, Josephine Bakhita was sold into slavery as a little girl. After being subjected to a series of different slave owners who would torture and beat her, Bakhita was sold to an Italian diplomat when she was 14 years old. It was around this time that she was introduced to Christianity by the Sisters of Charity in Venice. Bakhita refused to return to Africa with the diplomat when he and his family relocated and remained at the convent serving as the cook, seamstress, sacristan, and doorkeeper for the next 50 years until her death in 1947. St. Josephine Bakhita is the first African woman to be canonized as a saint by the Church in the 21st century.

St. Maurice: Jet-setters who frequent the Swiss resort town of St. Moritz are no doubt unaware that it was named after the first black person to be documented as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. He was known as Saint Maurice (aka St. Mauritius, or St. Moritz). A third-century Roman legionary who was born in Thebes in Upper Egypt, Maurice was martyred in what is today Switzerland for refusing to massacre Christians for the Roman Empire. He was canonized by the early church, long before the Pope reserved the right of the Holy See exclusively to canonize souls in 1634. In the late fourth century Theodore, the bishop of Octodurum, had a vision in which he saw the martyrdom of Maurice and his fellow soldiers at Agaunum, Switzerland. Soon after, the cult of Maurice was established and a church built on the site. Then, in the early sixth century (ca. 515), devotees established an abbey there on land donated by King Sigismund of Burgundy. The abbey is still an active monastery and pilgrimage site, and the tomb of St. Maurice has been excavated. Maurice's feast day is Sept. 22. Maurice was named a saint in the early Middle Ages, and many early depictions were of him as a white man. The first representations of him as a black African appear in the middle of the 13th century, when he is depicted as a black African soldier, in a magnificent stone statue in the Magdeburg Cathedral in central Germany in about 1240 A.D., standing next to the grave of Otto I, Holy Roman Emperor. His cult became important in many places across Germany through the 16th century, and hundreds of images of him stand in European churches. He is the patron saint of soldiers, swordsmiths, armies, infantrymen, weavers and dyers, and is the patron saint of several towns in Europe, including Manresa, Spain, and Piedmont, Italy.

St. Monica (Monica of Hippo): Outside of the Virgin Mary herself, perhaps no other mother had more influence on the Early Church than St. Monica. The mother of St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever seen, Monica has been honored by the Roman Catholic Church for her devout Christian virtues and for her tireless devotion to her [son](#), who wrote about her numerous pious acts as part of his famous book, “Confessions.” Christian legend claims St. Monica wept every night for her son and the “weeping” springs in Santa Monica, CA are named after her.

St. Thais: Born in Egypt, St. Thais was a beautiful woman who made a considerable amount of money [working](#) as the world's oldest profession. She eventually inquired about Christianity and wound up converting, leaving her old life as a prostitute behind. St. Thais gave away all of her money and devoted the rest of her life to Christ. After she was accepted into the Church, St. Thais performed penances for her sins before living among the nuns in the desert.

- **Black Americans whose causes are presented for canonization:** Henriette Delille (*Foundress Of The Sisters Of The Holy Family*), Fr. Augustus Tolston (*From Slave To First Black Priest In The USA*)