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## The Importance of Black History Month

Black History Month is when we commemorate the lives of influential people in Negro History and share their stories. Former President of the United States, Gerald Ford, declared that in February we should "seize the opportunity to honour the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history". Black History Month originated in 1926 in the United States. It was initially a week after The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History when a well-known historian named Dr. Carter G. Woodson announced that the second week of February would be Negro History and Literature Week. A week to honour Negro History was only part of Dr. Carter G. Woodson's endeavors to 'Develop, Democratize and Disseminate, Information on Black History'. For Dr. Carter G. Woodson's plans to become a reality, he needed the dedication of thousands of teachers, who shaped the celebration by their position in the schools. In addition, communities such as churches, sororities, libraries, social clubs, and civic institutions also helped to highlight black history. The idea of black history week spread throughout the world, including Bermuda.

Bermuda has had a legacy of slavery since the early 1600s. It was estimated that over 10 million enslaved people were unwillingly taken from Africa to the Western Hemisphere. In 1616, the governor, Daniel Tucker demanded that negroes be brought to the Island to mine, look for pearls, and plant tobacco. Slavery concluded in Bermuda in 1834, but that did not alter the unfair way that negroes were treated. There were often protests against unfairness, and inequality, such as the 1959 Boycotts and 1965 BELCO riots.

In the 1950s, discrimination and racism were ordinary occurrences. Just about everything was segregated by race. Schooling back then was segregated, and not much money was given to the schools for black people. Some black-only schools were Central School (Victor Scott), The Berkley Institute, Sandys Secondary, St. George's Secondary, Heron Bay, Purvis Primary, Paget Primary, Southampton Glebe, and West End Primary. Whitney Institute, Gilbert Institute, Somerset Primary, Port Royal Primary, Saltus, Warwick Academy, Bermuda High School were the schools for only White kids. Blacks and whites could not dine at the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, or even utilize the same washrooms, and they had to sit separated from whites in the movie theatre. The blacks in Bermuda were oblivious to what was occurring in the U.S. as much of the media then did not want the local blacks to know too much of what was happening there with the Civil Rights Movement, allowing the whites to continue dominating here in Bermuda. Black people were sometimes arrested or killed for 'disrespecting' White people and for crimes they did not commit.

An important memorable event in Bermuda's History was the 1959 Theatre boycott. The Bermuda Progressive Group arranged it. The Progressive Group was a group of young black leaders whose names were: Stanley Ratteray, Edouard Williams, Rosalind Williams, Clifford Wade, Marva Phillips, Coleridge Williams, Ruby and Vera Comissiong, Clifford and Florenz Maxwell, Eugene Woods, Esme Swan, Lancelot Sawn, Dr. Erskine Simmons, William Francis, William Walwyn, Gerald Harvey, and Izola Harvey. They were devoted to diminishing segregation in Bermuda. Their motivation was to improve the economic structure of

the Island. In February 1955, the Progressive Group joined together in secret to develop what Bermuda could and should look like. A retired member of the Progressive Group, Eugene Woods, expressed that negroes were meant to feel inferior to whites. The boycott was protesting against the policy of divided seating in theatres. It went on to incorporate restaurants and nightclubs. Many of these White businesses had to close because they were not getting enough money to stay open. Black people had stopped buying from them, so they had to close down until they changed their racist policies. Today, people are not publicly discriminated against based on race. Nowadays, black and white people can attend restaurants, theatres, nightclubs, and hotels. If you have the money, you can have what you want. Black people are now also allowed to stay in a hotel room too. Whereas before, they were not.

We are forced to believe that there is diversity and inclusion in schools, churches, and workplaces, but is there? If we compare the number of black people vs. whites in public schools, the blacks will outweigh the whites, while it is the opposite in private schools. When my mother and I work doing Sargasso, we can divide neighborhoods based on race and wealth. It has been statistically proven that a black man makes eighty-seven cents for every dollar a white man makes. Black people still are not holding many leadership positions at work.

The night of February 2nd, 1965, was a night of destruction and terrorism. Soldiers with rifles were sent to take authority over enraged workers protesting against the racist policies: low wages and limited job opportunities based on their ethnicity. Not only were negroes fighting for equal rights and pay, but they also protested for amenities that we still maintain today. This is an important event in black history because it paved the way for white and black workers' experiences today. These include a shorter workweek, paid vacations, paid holidays, social insurance, pension, and health insurance. If it were not for these consistent protests, life as we know it, would be vastly different.

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." Barack Obama. Today, we benefit from those influential black leaders who spoke up against the law for a change. Although we have come far, we still have a long way to go. In schools, we learn about European history year-round. It should be the same for Black History. The most important factor that a school should provide is equality. I have been lucky enough to attend a school where we learn about people from different cultures and backgrounds. If parents and educators shared the knowledge of Black History year long, Black History month would not be needed, but until that transpires, Black History Month will continue to be an annual celebration of freedom. Black History Month is important because we need to know our past to better our future. We need to appreciate those who fought for our rights. If it were not for them, nothing would have changed for Black people in Bermuda and worldwide.

## **Sites Used**

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The History of Black History Month, Stanford

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