

Chapter 1

The Soul of America

In This Chapter

- ▶ Capturing the African American experience throughout history
- ▶ Examining advances and challenges
- ▶ Exposing all Americans to African American history
- ▶ Remaining conscious of unresolved issues

Countee Cullen’s question, “What is Africa to me?,” from his 1930 poem “Heritage,” should resonate with more than African Americans. European interaction with the African continent profoundly changed the world, black, white, and otherwise, and nowhere else is that fact more evident than in the United States.

With the exception of South Carolina, Africans were largely the racial minority in early America, partially because white colonists adamantly restricted their numbers. Even in small numbers, though, Africans had an enormous impact on American history; the truth is that America has a dual history rooted in both Europe and Africa.

This chapter presents a general overview of African American history, underscoring why that history is important to all Americans.

A Peek at the Past

It’s been said that “to know your past is to know your future.” Is it inconceivable that the problems of the present stem from the past? Certainly, the United States has undergone tremendous change in the last six decades. If Americans believe that those changes affect them now, then the circumstances leading up to those changes must affect them, too. Americans felt that connection to a certain degree when Alex Haley’s book *Roots* (1976) and the subsequent television miniseries a year later sparked a nationwide fervor among African Americans and others to learn more about African Americans and their connection to Africa. Long before Haley’s tome, however, historians pondered African American history and its relationship to Africa and the United States.



Prophets looking backwards: African American historians

If, as German scholar Friedrich von Schlegel observed, “the historian is a prophet looking backwards,” then a number of prophets have emerged from African American history. Celebrated African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard University, chose the African slave trade as the subject of his doctoral dissertation and, in 1896, published *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America*. Thirteen years prior to Du Bois’s work, George Washington Williams, the first “colored” member of the Ohio legislature, published *History of the Negro Race in America From 1619 to 1880*.

Despite the scholarship of these men, Carter G. Woodson, the man frequently referenced as the Father of Black History, became one of the foremost advocates of African American history. The son of former slaves, he wrote some of the most influential works on the African American experience. He also established Negro History Week, which blossomed into Black History Month, with the hope that, one day, general American history would rightfully include the vital and numerous contributions of African Americans.

Woodson’s successors include:

- ✓ John Hope Franklin, author of the most widely used African American history textbook, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947)
- ✓ Lerone Bennett Jr., former executive editor of *Ebony* magazine and author of *Before the Mayflower* (1963)
- ✓ David Levering Lewis, Pulitzer award-winning historian known for *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981) and his two-part biography of W.E.B. Du Bois
- ✓ Paula Giddings, author of *When and Where I Enter* (1985) and *In Search of Sisterhood* (1988)
- ✓ Nell Irvin Painter, noted biographer of Sojourner Truth
- ✓ Robin D.G. Kelley, coeditor of *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (2000) and author of *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1991)



Carter G. Woodson, the man behind Black History Month, believed that preserving African American history was essential to African American survival. “If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition,” Woodson reasoned, “it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.” He also felt that omitting African American contributions from general American history sanctioned and perpetuated racism. “The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching,” he noted. Looking at matters from this perspective, it’s little wonder that African Americans have been so vilified.

However, it didn't begin that way. History acknowledges that the first Africans who came to Jamestown held a status closer to indentured servants. Yet in fewer than 50 years, African and slave became interchangeable. Therefore, racism against African Americans is 300 years old, *at the very least*. Because the dismantling of Jim Crow, an institutionalized system of segregating African Americans generally associated with the South, only began in the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S., as a nation, has only legally acknowledged African Americans as full citizens for about 50 years. The only way to correct the past and move forward is to recognize this reality. "I want American history taught," celebrated writer James Baldwin once demanded. "Unless I'm in the book, you're not in it either."

Life before slavery

Despite many history lessons to the contrary, African American history didn't begin with slavery; like other Americans, African Americans have a beginning that predates the Americas. Africans transported to the Americas through the slave trade generally hailed from Western and Central Africa, an area that includes present-day Ghana, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, Angola, and the Congo. Of Africa's many empires, Ghana, Mali, and Songhay are the most important to African American history. Some unique features of these empires included religious tolerance, attempts at representative government, and somewhat egalitarian attitudes concerning the contributions of women.

Although Egypt attracted European attention centuries before the slave trade began, tales of Africa's enormous riches reignited European interest in the continent. Portugal, which beat other European countries to Africa, didn't go there looking for slaves but rather for material wealth. And although the Portuguese captured Africans during those early trips, they weren't doomed to a lifetime of enslavement. Columbus's "discovery" of the New World and Spain's claim on the land changed that; when Spain instituted slavery to capitalize on cash crops like sugar, Portugal served as the primary supplier of Africans. As Chapter 3 explains, England entered the slave trade relatively late but excelled quickly.

Life before emancipation

The first Africans to arrive in Jamestown in 1619 held a status similar to indentured servants. Although the situation had changed drastically by the 1660s, there's no evidence that Africans ever resigned themselves to slavery. Even before the United States' official birth, African slaves appealed to the courts as well as the moral consciences of colonists.

Slave life was harsh, with human beings reduced to nothing more than property. Laws ensured that slaves had absolutely no control over their own lives. Slaveholders had the legal right to dictate their every move and mistreat them with no recourse. Consequently, slaveholders separated families without a second thought, and rapes and unwanted pregnancies were far from unusual occurrences for slave girls and women.

Still, in the greatest moments of despair, free blacks and their enslaved brethren never abandoned their hope for freedom. Whether they ran away, rallied sympathetic whites toward emancipation, or snuck slaves to freedom using the Underground Railroad, they did whatever they could to force the new nation to live up to its promise of freedom and equality. Less than a century into the new nation's existence, the inevitable finally happened with the rise of the Civil War.

Life before civil rights

Long before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, African Americans firmly set their minds on attaining freedom. When Lincoln wavered about ending slavery during the Civil War, African Americans like Frederick Douglass continued lobbying for freedom. Reconstruction (the period of recovery, particularly in the South, following the Civil War) revealed that most white Americans had never seriously entertained the idea of African American freedom. White Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was the grand exception. As he and others battled to right the wrongs of the past with the aid of newly inaugurated African American congressmen, white Southerners refused to change the status quo, and the North sat back and watched.

When Reconstruction ended, African Americans didn't give up the fight for racial equality as white mob violence corrupted their freedom and Jim Crow ruled their lives. In the 20th century, African American leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett pounced on every opportunity to challenge the "white only" claim on the U.S. The African American masses weren't silent either; in search of better jobs and a life free of Jim Crow, they migrated North with new urgency. Although the Promised Land wasn't all they imagined, they didn't abandon each other. Battling mob violence in the North, the nation saw that African Americans never accepted lynchings and Jim Crow; there wasn't really a "New Negro" at work but rather the old one in plain view. Marcus Garvey capitalized on that spirit when he launched his brand of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. (You can read about Du Bois, Wells-Barnett, Garvey, and others, as well as the Great Migration, in Chapter 7.)

The demographic shift created a new power base for African Americans. Prompted by the shameful treatment African Americans received during the Great Depression, black leaders demanded a piece of Roosevelt's New Deal program and switched from the Republican to the Democratic Party. By the time World War II rolled around, strong leaders, remembering the broken promises of World War I, wouldn't back down from their new demands. By the time the 1950s and 1960s came (see Chapters 7 and 8), the weapons critical to winning the battle against inequality were in place.

Being Black in America Today

The Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* dealt a powerful blow to the Jim Crow bully, but Emmett Till's brutal murder in Mississippi as the result of an innocent encounter with a white woman shook thousands out of their complacency. When Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged on the scene a few months later, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'roun'" became an anthem for change. The nonviolent, direct action favored by Gandhi, which Martin Luther King, Jr. followed, also worked in the U.S. However, Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and eventually the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) felt that black power was a more effective strategy and refused to turn the other cheek. Despite their differences, the two factions had the same ultimate goal: equality.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans amassed a vast assortment of incredible achievements. From serving as mayors in major cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago to selling millions of records worldwide, African Americans excelled in both expected and unexpected areas. Also, black household incomes consistently soared to record heights. The picture wasn't rosy for everyone, however. The effects of crack cocaine use literally ravished black neighborhoods, gun violence robbed mothers of their children, and prisons often sucked up those who survived.

So much has changed for the better for black Americans since King and Malcolm X lost their lives. Visible "colored only" and "white only" signs no longer exist, and black people aren't physically assaulted for daring to vote. Most of the obstacles that limited opportunities for African Americans at one time are gone. Yet vestiges of racism linger. On the one hand, hip-hop moguls such as Sean "Diddy" Combs and Jay-Z turn themselves into global brands; on the other hand, news cameras document black men, women, and children stranded on rooftops for days while elected officials place blame instead of expedite rescue efforts.

What's in a name? "Negro," the N-word, and many others

"African," "Afro-American," "colored," "Negro," "black," and "African American" are just some of the names used to describe people who trace their roots to the African continent. The constantly evolving terms largely reflect developments in African American culture and its relationship to the dominant white culture. The changes also reveal African Americans' ongoing quest for self-identity and self-determination.

Surprisingly, "Negro" didn't always refer to black people. At times, it also included Asians and, in the New World, Native Americans. In 19th-century runaway announcements, the term "negro" identified black Americans. Progressive institutions such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church preferred the term "African," but "colored" was widely used. In 1829, David Walker addressed his famous appeal to the "coloured citizens of the world." The use of "colored" by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) indicates the term's positive value in the early 20th century; in the years between the two world wars, the NAACP actually spearheaded the use of "Negro" with a capital "N," and that usage persisted into the 1960s.

As the civil rights movement gave way to the black power movement, "black" replaced "Negro." The 1980s ushered in the use of "African American," which supporters such as Jesse Jackson insist is a reflection of both an African and American identity. However, some

argue that it isn't specific enough because white Africans such as actress Charlize Theron are technically African American. Today, people often use "African American" and "black" interchangeably, and this book is a perfect example.

Slaves sometimes referred to themselves as "niggers" in front of whites to indicate their servility, and the term was widely used in early European and American history to refer to African Americans, including usage in novels such as Mark Twain's classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Although widely used, "nigger" was rarely a positive term, a point underscored in the midst of the civil rights movement when newspapers and television frequently quoted hostile white Americans using the word freely.

Some black Americans make distinctions between "nigger" and "nigga." African Americans almost never view the former positively. On the other hand, some African Americans view the latter more positively when used among African Americans, although saying it aggressively can indicate hostility. While hip-hop songs and comedy routines use the term liberally, it's generally unacceptable for non-African Americans to use "nigga" or "nigger" under any circumstances. The unwritten rule is that blacks can use the term and nonblacks can't. Of course, many black Americans, such as Oprah Winfrey, believe that absolutely no one should use the word under any circumstances.

Contributions

African American contributions to American history are tremendous. It's not a stretch to say that African slave labor, for example, is one of the main reasons the U.S. exists today. In the colonies, Africans cleared land and built

houses in addition to cultivating cash crops such as rice, tobacco, and cotton. African Americans weren't absent in the U.S. expansion westward either. In the North, African American slaves worked in the shipping industry as well as early factories. African American soldiers fought in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War.

African American contributions in music are celebrated the world over. Few authentic American music genres are without African American roots, including rock-and-roll, which counts Chuck Berry, Little Richard, the infamous Ike Turner, and the lesser-known Roy Brown and Wynonie Harris among its early pioneers. African American dance has influenced American culture since slavery. Literature and sports have also played key roles. So have less well-known contributions in medicine and architecture, among other fields. The following is a brief sampling of those contributions.

In music and dance

Trying to keep up with African American contributions in music and dance is dizzying. Jazz is an indigenous American art form birthed from African American culture, as are hip-hop, blues, ragtime, and spirituals. Many argue that jazz put the U.S. on the world's culture radar. Few musicians of any color have matched jazz maestro Duke Ellington's volume of compositions. And are there many gospel singers more well-known than Mahalia Jackson? "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" is easily one of the most popular gospel songs. On a similar note, Motown's catalog grows more timeless each year. To read more about African American music and musical influences, go to Chapter 16.

Throughout history, white Americans have borrowed African American dances. Actually, the dance that gave Jim Crow, America's caste system, its name originated with an African American performer. Both the Lindy Hop and the Charleston got a lift from African Americans, and many scholars have great reason to believe that tap dancing, as it's known today, was developed during slavery. In contemporary terms, black artists never seemed to run out of new dances in the 1950s and 1960s, and dancers and choreographers Katherine Dunham and Alvin Ailey garnered international praise for their mastery and innovation in the fields of ballet and modern dance. You can find out more about African American dance in Chapter 15.

In literature

Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature wasn't an anomaly in the context of the tradition from which she hails. To start, slave narratives captivated readers in America as well as abroad. White Americans may have questioned the talent of Phillis Wheatley, the remarkable slave poet, in court, but the English accepted her talent with ease. Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Alice Walker,

and so many other African American writers are American treasures whose voices have carried throughout the world. Chapter 14 discusses African American literature in detail.

In sports

Many African Americans have excelled in all types of sports. Muhammad Ali, Tiger Woods, Venus and Serena Williams, Michael Jordan, Arthur Ashe, Wilma Rudolph, Jesse Owens, and Major Taylor are just a few of the African American sports greats. (Read about African American athletes in Chapter 18.)

African American athletes have also played crucial roles in key social issues. Jackie Robinson helped the nation take a critical step toward racial desegregation when he broke Major League Baseball's color line in 1947. Muhammad Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam boosted antiwar efforts. And, in recent years, record-setting achievements by golfer Tiger Woods and real-life tennis sisters Venus and Serena Williams have diversified two international sports not generally associated with athletes of color.

Other contributions

African American contributions outside of sports, entertainment, and the arts are usually less known but are equally substantial. Dr. Charles Drew pioneered the blood bank. Based on his doctoral dissertation about "banked blood," he spearheaded the "Blood for Britain" project, which ultimately saved many of those wounded in World War II's critical Battle of Dunkirk. In 1941, he served as the director of the American Red Cross's plasma storage program for U.S. armed forces.

Both Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice fit into their individual appointments as secretary of state so easily that most Americans spent little time pondering the historic appointment of an African American to the critical position, nor the unprecedented succession of an African American by another African American. It's safe to assume most travelers to the Los Angeles International Airport are completely unaware that black female architect Norma Merrick Sklarek designed Terminal One.



Is it mere coincidence that Lewis Latimer served as draftsman for both Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison for the two inventions that people take for granted today? There's no doubt that Latimer's version of the light bulb using a carbon filament helped it stay bright longer. Without Garrett A. Morgan, the traffic light and the gas mask might not exist.

Discounting the enormity of African American contributions to American history and culture overall is a big mistake. African Americans have used their talents to benefit not just African Americans, but all Americans.

Challenges

Unfortunately, great achievements by African Americans haven't come easy. It's an understatement to say that African Americans have excelled against tremendous odds. Few cultures have produced as many titans who hail from such humble backgrounds as slavery and Jim Crow. Former slaves Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington were among the most prominent Americans of their day. Billionaire Oprah Winfrey, born poor in the Jim Crow South, was raised in a time when doing laundry for wealthy whites was as far as most African American women ever got.

With each of these extraordinary individuals, education was the difference maker. Yet, for much of American history, African Americans haven't had access to the ladders by which most Americans ascend to success.

Getting equal education

Securing a solid education has been crucial in the overall fight for equality. Education has provided the critical foundation from which African Americans have waged their fight against countless other inequities, be it inferior housing, discriminatory hiring practices, or police brutality.

Despite hard-won battles against inequities in education, affirmative action, one of its main corrective measures, is a constant target. Civil rights activists have charged that Proposition 209, an amendment to the California constitution purportedly aimed at ending racial discrimination in public education and other public areas of interest, has resulted in the enrollment of fewer disadvantaged students of color in higher education.

Ward Connerly, who classifies himself as multiracial, and other supporters of Prop 209, have taken their fight nationally and succeeded in helping similar measures pass in other states, including Michigan in 2006. Some institutions have discontinued scholarships for black students from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as dismantled programs exposing minority high school and college students to professions such as science, which boast far too few professionals of color.

The United States is at a critical crossroads. While school desegregation efforts throughout the nation, especially the South, only began in earnest in the 1970s, many Americans believe that the ills of 200-plus years of slavery and nearly 100 more of Jim Crow can be erased in less than 50 years.

Achieving the American dream

Historically, the American dream eluded African Americans. Immediately following the civil rights and black power movements, that no longer seemed true. African Americans began voting and electing African American

politicians. Poverty levels among African Americans began falling as the black middle class began expanding. Better yet, a larger number of African Americans became wealthy without hitting the lottery.

In recent years, there's been less to cheer about. Shaking the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow hasn't been easy for all. And while there are African Americans who continue to excel financially and otherwise, so many others are backtracking. As civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson often reminds Americans, the playing field is still unequal in many ways:

- ✓ **Income:** While the white poor constitute 8 percent of the total white population, nearly 25 percent of the African American population lives in poverty. African American household income has been 60 percent of white American household income since 1980. According to the Census Bureau, in 2005, average income for white Americans was \$50,622 compared to \$30,939 for black Americans.
- ✓ **Continuing discrimination:** Revelations of unwritten discriminatory policies against African Americans by corporations and other entities have come to light. In 1997, Avis Rent-A-Car paid a \$3.3-million settlement for allegations, primarily because it ignored numerous complaints about a North Carolina franchisee that required higher credit card maximums and proof of employment from prospective African American customers, but not other customers. Additionally several studies have claimed that it's not rare for African Americans with the same credit history and assets as white Americans to pay more for a home mortgage.
- ✓ **Healthcare:** Healthcare disparities are even broader. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2004, the cancer death rate for African Americans was 25 percent higher than that of white Americans. Black infants are twice as likely to die than white infants.
- ✓ **Incarceration rates:** According to the Sentencing Project, an advocacy group aimed at achieving a more equitable criminal justice system, there were 98,000 African Americans incarcerated in 1954 and 884,500 in 2004. Even given the obvious population growth, that statistic is substantial.

Fighting for civil rights

Those dismayed by the erosion of civil rights gains argue that the fight is more difficult now because dismantling covert racism isn't as galvanizing as dismantling overt racism. During the 1950s and 1960s, activists could point to "colored only" water fountains, public schools, and other visible manifestations of racial discrimination as clear evidence of racial injustice. Convincing Americans that the disproportionately high incarceration rates for African American men are rooted in slavery and Jim Crow is less compelling.

If most Americans, as various state referendums indicate, aren't interested in affirmative action programs and if proven early-education programs like Head Start consistently face budget cuts, what is the solution? Historian and political theorist Manning Marable, well-known for his scholarly work surrounding racism, and other civil rights activists consistently argue that recognizing that the events of the past are indeed connected to our present is the first step in creating a 21st-century strategy that will result in a more equitable American society for all its citizens.

Embracing the Past

During the 1960s, an especially turbulent time for the nation in general, African Americans appeared to vocalize racial pride more, although that impression may have been the result of increased media attention. (In the 1920s, for example, large numbers of black people were members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which emphasized racial pride.)

James Brown's hit 1968 single "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud" ended the usage of "colored" or "Negro" among African Americans and others. Slogans such as "Black is beautiful" helped define the early 1970s. African Americans began to expect more of other Americans, and total ignorance of African American culture was no longer acceptable. Today, it's customary for the president of the United States to acknowledge Black History Month at the very least. Increasingly, more and more people of various races believe that embracing the past can move the nation forward.

Celebrating black heritage

Contemporary African Americans celebrate their heritage in various ways. Here are some prominent examples:

- ✓ *The Cosby Show*, which aired from 1984 to 1992, exposed an entire nation to a rare slice of African American life. Creator and star Bill Cosby showed television audiences that African Americans could be financially successful without losing touch with their heritage by incorporating jazz, African American art, and African American colleges into the show.
- ✓ NBA great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar turned his attention to African American history in his post-basketball life, as evidenced by his book *Black Profiles in Courage: A Legacy of African-American Achievement* (1996).



✓ Congresswoman Maxine Waters collects African American memorabilia, including images of the controversial Aunt Jemima, the head-ragged pancake spokeswoman.

“Aunt Jemima is the black woman who cooked and cleaned, struggled, brought up her own family and a white family,” Waters explains. “And if I’m ashamed of Aunt Jemima — her head rag, her hips, her color — then I’m ashamed of my people.”

Of course, interest in African American history has spread beyond a few individuals. Demand for more information about African American history has resulted in corporate-funded PBS breakthrough series such as *Eyes on the Prize*, *Africans in America*, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, and *Slavery and the Making of America*. New scholarship and public demand has inspired increasingly more in-depth coverage of critical aspects of African American and American history that have revealed, among other things, that slavery was an American institution and not just a peculiarity of the South.

General American culture is also embracing African American culture. Many consider Martin Luther King, Jr., one of this nation’s greatest Americans, and, some white Americans even wear Malcolm X T-shirts. It isn’t rare to find Black History Month celebrated in schools with few or no African American students. In the world of academia, American literature classes include the works of African Americans. *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* is widely read in high schools, and general Southern literature courses include the work of black Southern writers Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Gaines, and Alice Walker. In fact, Ernest Gaines is arguably one of the most celebrated Southern writers since William Faulkner, and Nobel Prize–winner Toni Morrison is one of this nation’s greatest writers. Awareness and appreciation of African American culture by all is certainly on the rise.

Increasing demand for African American exhibits and museums

A boom in cultural or heritage tourism reflects the growing interest in the African American experience. People of all races have attended landmark exhibits such as the New York Historical Society’s “Slavery in New York.” Almost every state has uncovered enough information of specific relevance to African Americans to create an African American heritage tour. Exhibits have even gone online; for example, you can explore the Library of Congress’s “The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship” exhibit at memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaoh.html. The New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture also has several

online exhibits, including “Malcolm X: A Search for Truth” and “Harlem 1900–1940: An African-American Community” (www.nypl.org/digital/digitalcoll_allcollections.htm).

Cultural tourism specifically addressing slavery is increasingly popular, even in the South where the institution of slavery was more pervasive. This heightened interest has resulted in unique museums such as

- ✓ The Slave Relic Museum in Walterboro, South Carolina
- ✓ The Slavery and Civil War Museum in Selma, Alabama, which offers a slave reenactment experience
- ✓ The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, which gives visitors a taste of the Underground Railroad and various escape strategies used by slaves

African American communities across the nation have a long history of creating institutions to preserve their history. Notable museums include the Smithsonian’s respected Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and Chicago’s venerable DuSable Museum of African American History, named for the Haitian fur trader Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, the city’s first permanent settler. Two museums commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and death, the King Center in Atlanta, spearheaded by Coretta Scott King, and the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis (located at the Lorraine Motel, the site of King’s assassination), are the efforts of committed citizens that remain top tourist destinations in the United States, especially among African Americans.

In 2003, President George W. Bush signed a bill to create the National Museum of African-American History and Culture under the direction of the Smithsonian on the National Mall. This new museum, an expansion of the work of the Anacostia Museum, underscores the greater significance of African American history and culture to the nation as a whole.

Hard Lessons to Learn

Slavery remains a topic chock-full of emotions for many Americans, as former Virginia governor L. Douglas Wilder, the first elected black governor in the nation and the grandson of slaves, learned in his quest to launch the United States National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Attracting the support of both corporate and individual donors proved difficult for Wilder because many people don’t consider a museum about slavery a healing mechanism that can foster reconciliation with the past.

Slavery as an American (not Southern) institution

Despite the nation's tremendous gains, many people still fail to acknowledge the magnitude of slavery within the United States. They either don't understand or refuse to acknowledge that it was the economic backbone of the colonies and later the country. Although some businesses, such as Philip Morris and Wachovia Bank, have acknowledged their ties to slavery, many others have not. Slave labor, for example, helped build early railroad lines and institutions such as Brown University.



Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, a pioneering force behind the Corporate Restitution Movement (see the section “A question of reparation” later in this chapter), began tracing corporate ties to slavery in 1997. She rose to national prominence in 2000 when insurance giant Aetna apologized for its ties to slavery after learning that a subsidiary of the company insured slaves at one time. Since then, Farmer-Paellmann, an attorney, has uncovered similar links for over 50 companies. Because of Farmer-Paellmann's actions, several local and state governments now require that companies seeking public contracts disclose any links to slavery.

Flagging the issue

The Confederate flag flew during Civil War battles fought by the Confederacy to preserve its right to practice slavery. Yet many nonblack Americans, and a few African Americans as well, don't understand why the presence of the Confederate flag, particularly in government facilities, bothers so many African Americans. Those who defend displaying the Confederate flag charge that African Americans are too sensitive and that the flag represents Southern heritage and honors the Confederate dead and veterans, not racism or Jim Crow. Supporters fail to address the link between white Southern heritage and slavery and Jim Crow. While they defend the gentility of the antebellum South in the symbol of the Confederacy, others can't ignore the savagery of slavery that's part of the story as well.

Compounding the issue is the fact that the Confederate flag resurfaced in the South during the intense struggle to dismantle Jim Crow. South Carolina, for example, erected the Confederate flag atop the statehouse in 1962. It wasn't removed until 2000, after the NAACP spearheaded an economic boycott of the state until the flag was taken down.

A question of reparation

While there is certainly no lack of evidence that slavery was indeed real, those who support the reparations movement, which seeks to obtain acknowledgment and compensation for the descendants of slaves and, in some instances, Jim Crow, have encountered tremendous resistance. Simply pondering a formal apology for slavery created a furor during the Clinton presidency.

The reparations argument isn't a new one. For example, the U.S. government offered the following reparations after the Civil War:

- ✓ Many Confederate slaveholders who lost their land during the war got it back.
- ✓ Slaveholders in Washington, D.C., who emancipated their slaves received compensation for their losses.



Other precedents for reparations include a settlement by the federal government to Japanese Americans wrongfully interred during World War II. In 1994, Florida compensated survivors and descendants of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre, in which white Floridians attacked black Floridians. Read more about the Rosewood Massacre in Chapter 7.

The “forty acres and a mule” that General William Sherman promised to African Americans after the Civil War didn't really pan out (refer to Chapter 6), and no form of reparations were paid on a systematic scale to former slaves who later endured Jim Crow. Those who advocated compensation for ex-slaves include Alabama native William R. Vaughan, a white Democrat who proposed an ex-slave pension and, from 1890 to 1903, succeeded in getting nine such bills introduced in Congress, but none ever passed.



Callie House

Born a slave in 1861, Callie House was a washerwoman and widow living in Nashville, Tennessee. She was an important force in the ex-slave pension or reparations movement through her work with the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, which began in the 1890s. Basing her argument on the fact that ex-Union soldiers received pensions, House specifically targeted the \$68 million collected in taxes on rebel cotton to compensate ex-slaves. Trumped-up charges of

postal fraud erroneously suggested that her organization, which succeeded in galvanizing 300,000 ex-slaves across several states, was without merit. House's imprisonment in 1917 on postal fraud ended her fight but not her legacy.

Historian and law professor Mary Frances Berry brought the efforts of Callie House into heated contemporary reparations debates with her book *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (2005).

Advocates of reparations say that the movement is about more than money. According to respected historian and political theorist Manning Marable, reparations efforts serve a greater purpose. “What it’s about is an effort to reengage the American people in a discussion of racism in American life,” Marable explains. “It’s not about the money. [We want to] restart a genuine dialogue about racism and the economic consequences of slavery.” Citing the black-white income gap and denied access to capital, among other injustices, some economists estimate that racism costs African Americans as much as \$10 billion annually.

Fitting Tribute — At Last

On November 13, 2006, not far from the Capitol building (which African American slave labor helped build) and Pennsylvania Avenue (where African American slaves were once sold), three of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s children were present for the groundbreaking of the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Memorial, the first such memorial for an African American. “We give Martin Luther King [Jr.] his rightful place among the many Americans honored on the National Mall,” President Bush told a crowd of several thousand that included former president Clinton, who signed the bill authorizing the memorial; poet Maya Angelou; and King’s longtime civil rights friends and comrades Jesse Jackson and former U.S. Ambassador Andrew Young.

Congressman John Lewis, who spoke at the historic March on Washington when King delivered his majestic “I have a dream” speech, broke ground on the memorial in an emotional moment. Not so many decades before, police violently beat Lewis, a former president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as he marched with King from Selma to Montgomery seeking only the justice to which all Americans are entitled.

Conceived by his Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brothers in 1983, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial is a promising step in the right direction that symbolizes much more than a fitting tribute to a man President Bush said “redeemed the promise of America.” Such an honor goes beyond one person. “It’s because of them that I can be heard,” media titan Oprah Winfrey said, referring to the countless African Americans who struggled against incredible odds in the name of freedom for us all.