IN THIS CHAPTER

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

Chapter 1
The Soul of America

The word "Sankofa" from the Akan people in present-day Ghana and the Ivory Coast roughly translates to "knowing the past to know your future." The collective recognition of Black American history has come in stages and is frankly still evolving. In the mid-1970s, Americans felt that connection to a certain degree when Alex Haley's book *Roots* (1976) and the television miniseries sparked a nationwide fervor among Black Americans and others to learn more about Black Americans and their connection to Africa.

That passion was certainly reignited in the 2000s and 2010s as interest in DNA testing through companies like the Black-owned African Ancestry, allowing Black people, in particular, to see from which part of the African continent they may hail, exploded. So did interest in genealogy research, especially through online genealogy sites. Black scholar Henry Louis Gates proved this with the success of his 2006 PBS docuseries *African American Lives,* where he used DNA testing as well as historical and genealogical research to connect the American and African lineages of such participants as Oprah Winfrey, Chris Tucker, and Whoopi Goldberg. In 2008, he followed it with *Finding Your Roots* and later began incorporating white Americans, too.

Although the nation as a whole appeared to have a thirst for their roots, this quest seemed to once again take on special significance for Black Americans, who, through more than two centuries of slavery, had been routinely robbed of a direct, continuous connection to their African heritage. But what has that quest for

identity, belonging meant, especially in a country where it has been generally denied and suppressed? How does ignorance of Black American history contribute to the police killings of Black Americans like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice? Or to the Capitol Riot at the top of 2021? Why is Black Lives Matter even necessary in the 21st century and why are folks like Stacey Abrams fighting voter suppression?

Not knowing the contributions of Black Americans to overall American history isn't just a disservice to Black Americans. "I want American history taught," celebrated writer James Baldwin once demanded. "Unless I'm in the book, you're not in it either." This chapter presents a general overview of Black American history, underscoring its importance to Black Americans and *all* Americans.

A Peek at the Past

Perhaps no one individual did as much for the study and popularization of Black American history as Carter G. Woodson, the man responsible for Black History Month. Born in 1875 in Virginia to parents who were formerly enslaved, Woodson received his B.A. at Kentucky's Berea College, his M.A. at the University of Chicago, and his Ph.D. at Harvard.

Woodson, who taught and led public schools even after receiving his graduate degrees, spearheaded the 1915 founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), presently the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), which began publishing what is now the *Journal of African American History*. After overseeing the organization for more than 30 years, Woodson passed away in 1950 at the age of 74, but the organization still stands and is more than 100 years old.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Woodson believed that preserving Black American history was essential to Black 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 Black 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 Black Americans have been vilified.

The only way to move forward is to recognize this reality. And that can only be done by acknowledging the history. The following sections examine some moments in Black history.

Life before slavery

"What is Africa to me?" Countee Cullen asks in his 1930 poem "Heritage." It is a question that should resonate with more than just Black 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. Despite what you see in many textbooks, Black American history didn't begin with slavery; like other Americans, Black Americans have a beginning that predates the Americas.

Kidnapped 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 (also known as Côte d'Ivoire), Mali, Senegal, Angola, and the Congo. Of Africa's many empires, Ghana, Mali, and Songhay are the most important to Black American history. Some unique features of these empires included religious tolerance, attempts at representative government, and somewhat egalitarian attitudes concerning the contributions of women. Chapter 2 provides more information about these empires.

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 to become enslavers but rather to gain 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 kidnapped from their homes. As Chapter 3 explains, England entered the slave trade relatively late but excelled quickly.

Life before emancipation

The first Africans to arrive in Virginia to Point Comfort and, later, Jamestown in 1619 were brought in on slave ships. Historians of the past argued that these people weren't enslaved; however, when John Punch (believed to be an ancestor of Barack Obama on his mother's side and Nobel Prize winner Ralph Bunche) ran away from Virginia to Maryland with two indentured servants who were white in 1640, only he received a punishment of lifetime enslavement when captured. Still

the evidence shows that Africans, by and large, never resigned themselves to being enslaved and kept trying for their freedom, either through running away, challenging their status in court, or trying to appeal to the moral consciences of colonists.

Enslaved life was harsh, with human beings reduced to nothing more than property. Laws ensured that those enslaved had no control over their 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 enslaved girls and women.

Still, free Blacks and their enslaved brethren never abandoned their hope for freedom. Whether they ran away, rallied sympathetic white people toward emancipation or helped carry others 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 happened with the onset of the Civil War.

Life before civil rights

Long before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, Black Americans firmly set their minds on attaining freedom. When Lincoln wavered about ending slavery during the Civil War, Black 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 Black American freedom. Even some white abolitionists who believed that Black people shouldn't be enslaved didn't necessarily believe that they should enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other white people. White Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was the grand exception. He and others battled to right the wrongs of the past tied to slavery through various actions like proposing an amendment to the 1866 Freedmen's Bureau Bill for 40 acre lots for freedmen or supporting bills like the Civil Rights Act of 1866 declaring all men born in the country free with the aid of newly inaugurated Black American congressmen. White Southerners, evidenced by their subsequent push for poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and new state constitutions often excluding Black people, refused to change the status quo, and the North largely sat back and watched.

When Reconstruction ended, Black Americans continued the fight for racial equality as white mob violence compromised their freedom and Jim Crow ruled their lives determining where they could live, eat and socialize. In the 20th century,

Black American leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett seized every opportunity to challenge the "white only" claim.

Searching for better jobs and freedom from Jim Crow, Black Americans migrated North. Although the Promised Land wasn't all they had imagined, they didn't abandon each other. Battling mob violence in the North, the nation saw that Black Americans never accepted lynching or 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 Black Americans. Prompted by the shameful treatment Black Americans received during the Great Depression, Black leaders demanded a piece of Franklin Delano 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 1950s and 1960s (see Chapters 7 and 8), the weapons critical to winning the battle against inequality were in place.

BLACK AMERICAN FACES

PROPHETS LOOKING BACKWARD: BLACK AMERICAN HISTORIANS

If, as German scholar Friedrich von Schlegel observed, "the historian is a backward-looking prophet," then a number of prophets have emerged from Black American history. Celebrated Black American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the first Black American to receive a Ph.D. 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.* Twelve years prior to Du Bois's work, in 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 Black American history. He wrote some of the most influential works on the Black American experience. He also established Negro History Week in 1926, which blossomed into Black History Month, with the hope that one day general American history would rightfully include the vital and numerous contributions of Black Americans.

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Woodson didn't do this solo and worked with historians Charles H. Wesley, with whom he wrote *The Negro in Our History* (1962), and Lorenzo Greene, with whom he wrote *The Negro Wage Earner* (1930), among others. Black historians who have continued Woodson's push include the following:

- John Hope Franklin (1915–2009), author of arguably the most widely used Black American history textbook, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947)
- Lerone Bennett (1928–2018), former executive editor of *Ebony* magazine and author of *Before the Mayflower* (1963)
- John W. Blassingame (1940–2000), historian and Yale professor who authored several groundbreaking histories, including the 1972 *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press); it centered on the voices of Black people, most notably allowing enslaved people to be seen in their own history
- Sterling Stuckey (1932–2018), important historian who advanced the idea that Black people retained their African culture during slavery and impacted the rest of the nation primarily through his 1987 groundbreaking book *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford University Press)
- David Levering Lewis, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian known for the 1981 *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Penguin Books) and his two-volume biography series, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (1993) and *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919-1963: The Fight for Equality and the American Century* (2000) (Holt)
- Paula Giddings, author of the 1983 *When and Where I Enter* (W. Morrow), the 1988 *In Search of Sisterhood* (William Morrow Paperbacks), and the 2008 *Ida: A Sword among Lions* (Amistad)
- Nell Irvin Painter, author of the 1996 *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (W. W. Norton & Company) and the 2006 *Creating Black Americans* (Oxford University Press)
- Robin D.G. Kelley, coeditor of the 2000 *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (Oxford University Press) and author of the 1991 *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (University of North Carolina Press)

Being Black in America Today

The Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) dealt a powerful blow to the Jim Crow bully, but Emmett Till's brutal murder in Mississippi in 1955 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 'Round" became an anthem for change.

The nonviolent direct action favored by Gandhi, which the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. followed, also worked in the United States. 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 goals: freedom and equality.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Black 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, Black Americans excelled in both expected and unexpected areas. Black household incomes consistently soared to record heights. The picture wasn't rosy for everyone, however. The effects of crack cocaine 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 had their lives taken. Visible "colored only" and "white only" signs no longer exist, and Black people aren't physically assaulted for daring to vote. Many of the obstacles that limited opportunities for Black 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 have turned themselves into global brands. On the other hand, news cameras documented Black men, women, and children stranded on rooftops for days during Hurricane Katrina while elected officials placed blame instead of expediting rescue efforts, and cellphone cameras have captured unarmed Black people being killed by the police. Not even the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president in 2008 could change this reality. And under his successor, one-time reality star Donald Trump, whose presidency spanned from 2017 to 2021, the nation's barometer for anti-Blackness only worsened.

Contributions to history and culture

Black American contributions to American history are tremendous. It's not a stretch to say that enslaved African labor, for example, is one of the reasons the U.S. exists as it does today. In the colonies, Africans cleared land and built houses in addition to cultivating cash crops such as rice, tobacco, and cotton. Black Americans weren't absent in the U.S. expansion westward either. In the North, enslaved Black Americans worked in the shipping industry as well as early factories. Black soldiers fought in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War.

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 Black American culture and its relationship to the dominant white culture. The changes also reveal Black Americans' ongoing quest for self-identity and self-determination.

Surprisingly, "Negro" didn't always refer to Black people. At times, it 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 insisted reflected both an African and American identity. However, some argue that it isn't specific enough because white African immigrants such as actress Charlize Theron and business mogul Elon Musk are technically African American. Today, people often use "African American" and "Black" interchangeably.

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

Some Black Americans, especially with the onset of rap music, made distinctions between "nigger" and "nigga." Some Black Americans view the latter more positively when used among Black Americans, although saying it aggressively can indicate hostility. Even though hip-hop songs and comedy routines use the term liberally, it's generally unacceptable for non-Black Americans to use it under any circumstances. The unwritten rule is that Black people can use the term, and non-Black people can't. Of course, many Black Americans believe that absolutely no one should.

Black American contributions in music are celebrated the world over. Few authentic American music genres are without African 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. Black 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 Black American contributions in music and dance is dizzying. Jazz is an indigenous American art form birthed from Black American culture, as are hip hop, blues, ragtime, and spirituals. Many argue that jazz put the United States on the world's cultural 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 about Black American music and musical influences, go to Chapter 16.

Throughout history, white Americans have borrowed Black American dances. Actually, the dance that gave Jim Crow, America's caste system, its name originated with a Black performer. Both the Lindy Hop and the Charleston got a lift from Black 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 about Black 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 poet who was enslaved, in court, but the English accepted her talent with ease. Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and so many other Black writers are American treasures whose voices have carried throughout the world. Chapter 14 discusses Black literature in detail.

In sports

Many Black 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 Black American sports greats. (Read about Black athletes in Chapter 19.)

Black 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. Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam boosted antiwar efforts. Without question, Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem as the San Francisco 49ers quarterback during the 2016 season heightened awareness of racial injustice, police brutality, and Black Lives Matter. LeBron James's outspokenness also brought increased awareness to Black Lives Matter, with him and his colleagues in the NBA and WNBA using their platform during the pandemic to speak out against the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and more.

Pioneers, inventors, and other contributors

Black American contributions outside 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 a Black American to this critical position, nor the unprecedented succession of a Black American by another Black American. It's safe to assume most travelers to the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) during the 1984 Olympics were completely unaware that Black female architect Norma Merrick Sklarek designed Terminal One.

BLACK AMERICAN FACES

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 Black American contributions to American history and culture overall is a big mistake. Black Americans have used their talents to benefit not just Black Americans but also all Americans and the world at large.

Challenges

Black Americans have excelled against tremendous odds. Few cultures have produced as many titans who hail from such humble backgrounds as slavery and Jim Crow. The formerly enslaved 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 white people was as far as many Black women could aspire.

With each of these extraordinary individuals, education was the difference maker. Yet for much of American history, Black Americans haven't had access to the ladders by which most Americans climb 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 Black 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 is a constant target. Civil rights activists 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, according to a 2020 report from EdSource, a nonprofit reporting on California's education challenges, resulted in a lower Black student enrollment in California State University and University of California institutions disproportionate to their Black high school graduation rates.

School desegregation efforts in the South and throughout the nation that only began in earnest in the 1970s has proven that the ills of 200-plus years of slavery and nearly 100 more of Jim Crow can't be erased in just 50 years or more. The impact of No Child Left Behind and an administration with Betsy DeVos heading the Department of Education, not to mention the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and student loans, only compounded the racial disparities in education, particularly as it pertained to the racial technology gap impacting less wealthy Black and other marginalized communities.

Achieving the American dream

Historically, the American dream eluded Black Americans. Immediately following the civil rights and Black Power movements, it no longer seemed true. Black Americans began voting and electing Black politicians. Poverty levels among Black Americans began falling as the Black middle class began expanding in the latter part of the 20th century. Better yet, a larger number of Black Americans became wealthy without hitting the lottery or becoming sports or entertainment celebrities.

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 although some Black Americans continue to excel financially and otherwise, many others are backtracking. As civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson often reminded Americans, the playing field is still unequal in many ways:

- **Income:** Even though the white poor constitute 8 percent of the total white population, nearly 25 percent of the Black American population lives in poverty. Black American household income has been 60 percent of white American household income since 1980.
- **Wealth:** *Wealth* is the difference between assets (like homes and retirement accounts) and debt. The 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), sponsored by the Federal Reserve Board in cooperation with the U.S. Treasury Department, found that white families, with median family wealth totaling $188,200, outpaced that of Black families, with median family wealth of just $24,100.
- **Discriminatory policies:** Revelations of unwritten discriminatory policies against Black Americans by corporations and other entities have come to light. In 1997, Avis Rent-A-Car paid a $3.3 million settlement for ignoring numerous complaints about a North Carolina franchisee that required higher credit card maximums and proof of employment from prospective Black customers but not others. Several studies revealed that it's not uncommon for Black Americans with the same credit history and assets as white Americans to pay more for a home mortgage or to sell their homes for considerably less.
- **Healthcare:** Healthcare disparities are even broader. According to statistics from 2019, Black infants were more than twice as likely to die as white infants, with Black mothers dying at three and four times the rates of white mothers. The COVID-19 pandemic, which took off in the U.S. in early 2020, revealed many more disparities in the healthcare system; Black people, even by November 2020, were nearly three times as likely to die from it.

Addressing the criminal justice system

According to the Sentencing Project, an advocacy group aimed at achieving a more equitable criminal justice system, 98,000 Black Americans were incarcerated in 1954 and 50 years later 884,500 were incarcerated in 2004. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018, Black Americans, mostly men, composed nearly 33 percent of the prison population when the Black population as a whole, male and female, was just around 12 to 13 percent. And although the prison population dropped during Obama's presidency, the most significant change was among the white and Latino population.

GEORGE FLOYD AND OTHER POLICE KILLINGS

Video of the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, sent collective shock through many in the United States and globally. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee against Floyd's neck and did not remove it even when Floyd, who was completely unarmed, called for his mother. Instead, Chauvin waited until Floyd was dead at age 46. Floyd's crime? He was accused of passing off a counterfeit $20 bill. Seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier captured it all on her cellphone. The public response, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, was an outpouring of protests largely in the name of Black Lives Matter by Americans of all races and ages in cities, big and small. Internationally, people protested in solidarity. Historically speaking, the fact that Chauvin was charged with any degree of murder for George Floyd's death marked progress.

Prior to Floyd's death, other Black people who had lost their lives at the hands of the police had become news headlines and hashtags. On August 9, 2014, Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson killed unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was later accused of stealing a box of Swisher Sweets cigars from a convenience store. Attempts to bring charges against Wilson failed under Black county prosecutor Wesley Bell, who had been elected in 2018 to replace Bob McCulloch, a white man who had been in the office since 1991.

Brown's killing came weeks after the July 17 death of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old father of six, in Staten Island. He was held in a chokehold by New York City police officer Daniel Pantaleo for unconfirmed allegations of him illegally selling cigarettes. Pantaleo ignored Garner's cries of "I can't breathe." Garner's death, captured on video, sparked outrage.

Outrage over Floyd's killing helped bring national attention to Breonna Taylor's shooting death. At just age 26, she was killed in her apartment by Louisville Metro police officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove on March 13, 2020. That attention prompted public responses from noted Black celebrities, with Oprah Winfrey, rapper Megan Thee Stallion, and LeBron James among them. Yet by February 2021, no arrests had materialized in Taylor's killing despite Kentucky's Republican attorney general Daniel Cameron being Black.

After witnessing Floyd's execution, something snapped for many Americans, who previously couldn't fathom that this kind of tragedy wasn't an anomaly. That response was much like that to Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama — the epic civil rights tragedy on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, when Alabama state troopers, along with random white men deputized that morning, physically attacked peaceful protesters, including John Lewis; television cameras captured the events. As with Trayvon Martin's death, Floyd's created a ripple whose impact would be felt for years to come.

As activism around unfair sentencing and the decriminalization of marijuana heated up, however, those arguments became more mainstream. Books like the 2010 *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press) by civil rights litigator and legal scholar Michelle Alexander and documentaries like Ava DuVernay's *13th* (2016), which was nominated for an Oscar and won an Emmy, greatly helped reinvigorate the fight. The greatest difference maker, however, has been the Black Lives Matter movement.

Black Lives Matter was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 in response to the acquittal of 28-year-old George Zimmerman. Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, had shot to death unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, whom he deemed suspicious, on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida. Known for its hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, the movement has been most often associated with its stance against police brutality and killings as well as the persistence of white supremacy and institutionalized racism.

Fighting systemic racism

Prior to the 2010s, people dismayed by the erosion of civil rights gains argued that the fight was more difficult because dismantling covert racism wasn'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 Black Americans was rooted in slavery and Jim Crow was less compelling in the early 2000s. Plus there were also people who simply felt powerless to change it.

Anti-racism work, most notably by Ibram X. Kendi, author of the 2016 *Stamped from the Beginning* (Bold Type Books) and the 2019 *How to Be an Antiracist* (One World), found its way on mainstream news programs, as did the work of attorney and activist Bryan Stevenson to free Black men wrongly sentenced to death row. This raised awareness of the lynching of Black people throughout American history. Historian and political theorist Manning Marable, well-known for his scholarly work surrounding racism prior to his 2011 death, and other civil rights activists consistently argued that recognizing that the events of the past are indeed connected to the present is the first step in creating any strategy for a more equitable American society for all citizens.

Black Pride Goes Mainstream

During the 1960s, an especially turbulent time for the nation in general, Black Americans appeared to vocalize racial pride more, although that impression may have been the result of increased media attention. (In the 1920s, for example, tens

of thousands 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" largely ended the usage of "colored" or "Negro" among Black Americans and others. Slogans such as "Black is beautiful" helped define the early 1970s. Black Americans began to expect more of other Americans, and total ignorance of Black American culture was no longer acceptable. Since the 1970s, it's been customary for the President of the United States to acknowledge Black History Month at the very least.

Celebrating Black heritage

Interest in Black American history spread beyond a few individuals. Demand for more information about Black American history 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 inspired increasingly more in-depth coverage of critical aspects of Black American and American history that have shown, among other things, that slavery was an American institution and not just a peculiarity of the South.

General American culture also began embracing and acknowledging aspects of Black American culture. Curiously many now consider the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was strongly disliked when he was killed in 1968, one of this nation's greatest Americans, and some white Americans proudly count themselves as allies to Black people and various anti-Black causes. Even with the push-back during the Donald Trump administration, it wasn't uncommon to find Black History Month celebrated in schools with few or no Black students.

During the Obama presidency (2009–2017), there was a notable shift in positive expressions of Black culture. President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama consistently incorporated historic and contemporary Black American culture into the White House, including

- Hosting screenings of films such as 2016's *Hidden Figures,* about the role Black women played in getting American astronauts to the moon
- Acquiring art pieces like the 1940s-era *Lift Up Thy Voice and Sing* by William H. Johnson
- Sponsoring musical performances featuring the hip-hop band The Roots, rapper Common, singers Jill Scott and John Legend, and even hip-hop R&B trio BBD (Ricky Bell, Michael Bivins, and Ronnie Devoe of 1980s New Edition fame)

- Sparking the full production of Lin-Manuel Miranda's groundbreaking theatrical phenom *Hamilton,* which created stars out of several Black actors, including Leslie Odom Jr., Daveed Diggs, Jasmine Cephas Jones, and Renée Goldsberry

American literature classes include the works of Black 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 arguably became one of the most celebrated Southern writers since William Faulkner, and Nobel Prize–winner Toni Morrison is widely considered one of the greatest writers the nation has ever produced.

In the pop culture landscape, more than just Black Americans helped the 2018 film *Black Panther,* the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first Black cast offering, top the box office. Black culture clearly began scoring major wins in all aspects of American life.

Black cultural tourism booms

A boom in cultural tourism in the early 2000s reflected the growing interest in the Black American experience. People of all races attended landmark exhibits such as the New York Historical Society's "Slavery in New York." Almost every state uncovered enough information of specific relevance to Black Americans to create an American heritage tour. Many exhibits have gone online; for example, the Library of Congress long ago began digitizing some of its collection. The same is true of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Cultural tourism specifically addressing slavery and emancipation increased in popularity, even in the South, where the institution of slavery was more pervasive. This heightened interest contributed to unique museums such as

- **The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center:** This museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, gives visitors a taste of the Underground Railroad, along with the various escape strategies used by those who were enslaved.
- **The Whitney Plantation Historic District:** Less than an hour outside of New Orleans, this former sugar plantation dating back to 1872 has served as a slavery museum, dismantling the myths since 2014.

» **The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration:** Operated by celebrated civil and human rights attorney and activist Bryan Stevenson's EJI in Montgomery since 2018, this museum sits where enslaved people were once warehoused not far from an auction block and other sites where Black people were harmed.

Black communities across the nation have a long history of creating institutions to preserve their history. In time, those institutions began attracting visitors beyond the communities they served. Notable institutions include 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 and founder, and the Weeksville Heritage Center, one of the few intact remnants of a free Black Northern pre-Civil War community, in Brooklyn, New York.

Then there are institutions commemorating the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and death, including the King Center in Atlanta (envisioned by Coretta Scott King), the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis (located at the Lorraine Motel, the site of King's assassination), and the national memorial in Washington, D.C. The following sections cover this memorial as well as the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

A memorial for a King

On November 13, 2006, not far from the Capitol building (which Black enslaved labor largely built) and Pennsylvania Avenue (where enslaved Black Americans were once sold), three of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s children were present for the groundbreaking of the national Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. "We give Martin Luther King his rightful place among the many Americans honored on the National Mall," President George W. Bush told a crowd of several thousand that included former President Clinton, who had signed the bill authorizing the memorial; poet Maya Angelou; and King's longtime civil rights friends and comrades Jesse Jackson and Ambassador Andrew Young. King, Bush said, "redeemed the promise of America."

Congressman John Lewis, who spoke at the historic March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs in 1963 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 had beaten Lewis, a former president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as he marched with King from Selma to Montgomery, seeking the justice to which all Americans are entitled.

Conceived by King's Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brothers in 1983, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial opened in 2011 as a fitting tribute. Hurricane Irene disrupted the original August 23, 2011, dedication, but the reset for October 16, just four years shy of 1995's historic Million Man March held on the same day, went well.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Back in 1964, King predicted that the country would elect a Black president between 25 and 40 years later. On the day of the dedication of his memorial, President Obama said, "Our work is not done. And so on this day, in which we celebrate a man and a movement that did so much for this country, let us draw strength from those earlier struggles. First and foremost, let us remember that change has never been quick."

A Black American museum on the National Mall

In 2003, when President George W. Bush signed a bill to create the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) on the National Mall, there was no way to gauge how much of a sensation it would become. When the museum, which had been a concept dating as far back as 1915, opened September 24, 2016, President Barack Obama was in the last months of his presidency. The design chosen back in 2009 came from Black American architects Philip Freelon and J. Max Bond Jr., along with Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye. Black billionaires Oprah Winfrey and Robert Smith donated $21 and $20 million, respectively, to help build the museum, which was constructed in part by two Black-owned construction companies, Smoot Construction of Columbus, Ohio, and H.J. Russell & Company of Atlanta, Georgia.

Joined by four generations of the Bonner family, including 99-year-old matriarch Ruth, whose father had been born enslaved in Mississippi, President Obama helped ring the Freedom Bell, borrowed to officially open the museum headed by Lonnie Bunch III. The bell had been acquired in 1886 by the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia, one of the oldest Black churches in the nation (dating back to 1776). In just four months, a million people visited the 350,000-square-foot, 10-story museum, making it one of the Smithsonian's most visited museums. It has more than 40,000 items in its collection.

Reconciling the Past to Create the Future

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 enslaved people, 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.

THE 1619 PROJECT

History, for a long time, suggested the first Africans who arrived in British North America, as opposed to Africans who were already in other parts of the "New World," held a legal status closer to indentured servants. This classification, however, completely ignored the fact that those Africans were kidnapped from present-day Angola and arrived in what is now Virginia on a pirated slave ship. Although their status wasn't clearly an enslaved one legally, it was in practice. In fewer than 50 years, however, "African" and "slave" would indeed become legally interchangeable.

In 2019, *The New York Times* commemorated the 400 years since those Africans' arrival with its ambitious longform journalism initiative, the 1619 Project, intended to place slavery and Black American contributions at the center of the American narrative. In her introductory essay, staff writer and 1619 Project lead Nikole Hannah-Jones, who received her bachelor's degree in history and African American Studies from Notre Dame, argued that preserving slavery was a motivating factor behind the American Revolution.

That sweeping generalization threatened to derail the great enthusiasm around the project, which included journalists (Wesley Morris and Trymaine Lee), artists (filmmakers, poets, writers, playwrights like Barry Jenkins, Yusef Komunyakaa, Jacqueline Woodson and Jesmyn Ward, and Lynn Nottage), activists (Bryan Stevenson), and a handful of academics (Khalil Gibran Muhammad), tackling a myriad of issues, including the prison system, the racial wealth gap, and other fallout connected to slavery and Jim Crow, a system in which Black people were legally discriminated against based on race alone generally associated with the American south where there were even separate "white" and "colored" water fountains.

Historians of varying political persuasions pushed back against Hannah-Jones's assertion, with respected white Princeton historian Sean Wilentz even circulating a letter objecting to the project. Black historian Leslie M. Harris wrote an opinion piece titled "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me" for *Politico* in March 2020. She claimed her objections to Hannah-Jones's assertion that slavery prompted the Revolutionary War were initially dismissed but also acknowledged that Hannah-Jones later promised to amend it and that, even with its issues, the 1619 Project was "a much-needed corrective to the blindly celebratory histories." Even with Republican politicians like Tom Cotton in Arkansas threatening to prohibit K-12 schools from accessing federal funds for any curriculum related to the 1619 Project, the climate of racial reckoning that had inhabited the country could not be stopped.

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Prior to Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project, Ta-Nehisi Coates ignited a fire with his 2014 article "The Case for Reparations," for *The Atlantic.* Coates traced the nation's injustice against Black Americans by following Clyde Ross as he moved from being raised in a sharecropping family in 1920s Mississippi through serving in the military to trying to buy a house in Chicago. "The Case for Reparations" awakened many Americans to the reality that Jim Crow wasn't just a Southern institution or practice. It also helped many of them to connect the dots between slavery, Jim Crow, and the racial injustice Black Americans still face.

Slavery as an American (not Southern) institution

Slavery, as evidenced by the 1619 Project (see the nearby sidebar), is the primary unresolved issue in race relations in this country. 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. Enslaved labor, for example, helped build early railroad lines and institutions such as Brown University. Ultimately slavery continues to matter centuries later because its white supremacist ideology subjugating Black Americans has historically been transferred to federal, state, and city government levels, as well as other entities, resulting in Black Americans experiencing racial bias, job discrimination, redlining, and other inequities only based on race.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, a pioneering force behind the Corporate Restitution Movement (see the upcoming section "A question of reparations") who is also credited for energizing the contemporary reparations movement, 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 those enslaved at one time. Farmer-Paellmann, an attorney, then 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 battle flag flew during Civil War battles fought by the Confederacy to preserve its right to practice slavery. Yet for a long time, many non-Black Americans, and a few Black Americans as well, couldn't understand why the presence of the Confederate battle flag, particularly in government facilities or in the Mississippi state flag, bothered so many Black Americans.

Those who defended displaying the Confederate battle flag, also known as the Southern Cross, charged that Black Americans were too sensitive and that the flag merely represented Southern heritage and honored the Confederate dead and veterans. Supporters then often failed to address the link between white Southern heritage and slavery and Jim Crow. Although they defended the gentility of the antebellum South in the symbol of the Confederacy, others simply could not ignore the savagery of enslaving millions of people.

The fact that the Confederate battle flag, the most well-known of the three flags associated with the Confederacy during the Civil War, resurfaced in the South during the intense struggle to dismantle Jim Crow compounded the issue. South Carolina, for example, began flying the Confederate battle flag over the statehouse in 1961 to commemorate the centennial of the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 at Fort Sumter near Charleston (read about the Civil War in Chapter 6). It wasn't until 2000, after the NAACP spearheaded an economic boycott of the state, that the flag was taken down from atop the Capitol dome.

Instead of South Carolina lawmakers ending its allegiance to the Confederate battle flag, it compromised to shift it to a nearby monument for Confederate soldiers on statehouse grounds. And making matters worse, South Carolina lawmakers passed the 2000 Heritage Act, requiring a two-thirds vote of each house of the General Assembly to change it, to protect the flag as well as Confederate and Civil War monuments across the state.

Change came only after activist Bree Newsome was arrested June 27, 2015, for removing the Confederate battle flag from South Carolina statehouse grounds to protest the Charleston church massacre just ten days earlier on June 17, when a 21-year-old white South Carolinian killed nine Black South Carolinians during Bible study at historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, well known as Emanuel AME, founded in 1817. Although the flag was back flying within an hour, it permanently came down July 10, with Governor Nikki Haley, the daughter of Indian immigrants, reversing her previous stance to never remove the flag.

In 2020, the impossible happened in Mississippi. On the heels of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) — one of the most powerful sports entities in all of college sports — and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which governs all college sports, vowed not to hold official championship events in the state as long as the Mississippi state flag continued to incorporate the Confederate battle flag. The state legislature voted to change the state flag on June 28, 2020, with Governor Tate Reeves signing it into law on June 30. Mississippi voters overwhelmingly approved the flag's new design prominently featuring a magnolia, the state flower, on November 3, 2020, with the new flag becoming official January 11, 2021.

A question of reparations

Although there has never been a lack of evidence that slavery was indeed real, supporters of the reparations movement in its various iterations seeking to obtain acknowledgment and compensation for the descendants of those enslaved and, in some instances, Jim Crow, have historically encountered tremendous resistance. Simply pondering a formal apology for slavery created a furor during the Bill Clinton presidency in 1998. President George W. Bush's 2003 apology in Goree Island in Senegal, from which kidnapped Africans were transported into slavery, didn't attract the same furor. Although there were mixed reactions to the Senate passing an apology for enslaving Black Americans and their African descendants for more than two centuries as well as subsequent decades of racial segregation and injustice that followed in 2009, it did help open another important window.

In the 2010s, American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) gained steam among many Black Americans both as a movement associated with leaders Yvette Carnell and Antonio Moore and as a general concept of Black Americans who trace their lineage back to those enslaved in the United States. For many, white and Black, Ta-Nehisi Coates's groundbreaking 2014 article "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic* helped ground the movement.

Coates, who gained an incredible following after the article, was even called upon to testify before a House Judiciary subcommittee hearing on H.R. 40, a bill sponsored by Texas Democrat Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee that Michigan Democrat Congressman John Conyers introduced back in 1989; it coincided with Juneteenth, a celebration dating back to June 19, 1865, popularly described as commemorating when enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas first learned of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and believed themselves free. The H.R. 40 Bill to Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act remained in discussion even in February 2021.

Contrary to popular belief, reparations isn't a concept specific to Black Americans. For example, the U.S. government offered the following reparations:

- Many Confederate slaveholders who lost their land during the war got it back.
- Slaveholders in Washington, D.C., who emancipated those they enslaved received compensation for their losses.
- When 11 Italian men were killed via lynching in New Orleans on March 14, 1891, the U.S. government, under President Benjamin Harrison, paid $2,211.90 to each of their families in Italy, a total amount of $24,330.90.

- The federal government paid a settlement to Japanese Americans wrongfully interred in camps during World War II.
- In 1994, Florida compensated survivors and descendants of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre, in which white Floridians attacked Black Floridians. (Read about the Rosewood Massacre in Chapter 7.)

The "forty acres and a mule" that General William Sherman promised to Black 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 those formerly enslaved. Those who advocated compensation for ex-slaves, as they were referred to, include Alabama native William R. Vaughan, a white Democrat who proposed an ex-slave pension and succeeded in getting nine such bills introduced in Congress from 1890 to 1903 but not in passing them.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Some advocates of reparations have argued that the movement was about more than money. Prior to his 2011 passing, respected historian and political theorist Manning Marable argued that reparations efforts served a greater purpose. "What it's about is an effort to reengage the American people in a discussion of racism in American life," Marable explained. "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 Black Americans as much as $10 billion annually.

BLACK AMERICAN FACES

CALLIE HOUSE

Born enslaved 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).

Cash payouts for reparations, however, is what most Americans, good or bad, envision. By some estimates, that number, should it ever materialize on a federal level, could hit between $10 and $12 trillion. BET (Black Entertainment Television) co-founder Bob Johnson and one-time billionaire proposed a $14 trillion plan in 2020. In 2019, the Evanston city council, in the Chicago metro area, agreed to a reparations effort led by Black Alderwoman Robin Rue Simmons for housing discrimination. Two years later, the city made national news with its proposal to make its $25,000 reparations payments for home improvements or mortgage assistance to its Black residents who suffered discriminatory housing practices who had lived in or had been descended from an Evanston resident dating back to before 1969 through a marijuana tax.