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CARTER GODWIN WOODSON

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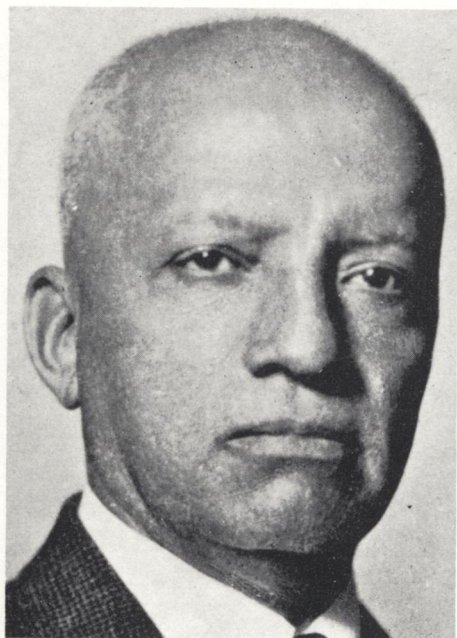
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CARTER GODWIN WOODSON, Ph.D., LL.D., 1875-1950

CARTER GODWIN WOODSON

by
W. Montague Cobb* *

Vision and Dedication

Carter Godwin Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, had a vision. It is fortunate for mankind that he had the intellectual capacity, the determination, the perseverance and the physical ruggedness and endurance to make it a reality. In appreciation, the plaque shown above, presented to him by the City Teachers Association of Baltimore says all.

By 1912 when he was 37 and had just received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University, he had clearly perceived the bases of racism which lay in ignorance and seen that there was a dearth of knowledge about the history of the Negro which could not be offset by propaganda of any kind. Accordingly, he set out to do and to stimulate original research on the history of the Negro and to make the information resultant from these scientific monographs available to the layman at every educational level. His concept of the problem was total and the progress he made toward his goals extraordinary.

Dr. Woodson worked in a time not yet attuned to his efforts and in an environment

in which powerful influences were actively hostile to his purposes. Consequently, throughout his career he was essentially a "loner." But he represented the quintessence of what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes meant when he wrote.

*Only when you have worked alone and felt about you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds a dying man, when in hope and despair you have trusted in your own unshaken will, only then will you have achieved. Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker who knows that a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought.**

Today, only two decades after Carter Woodson's death, thousands who never heard of him are moving to the measure of his thought. Every proponent of "black awareness" and every contributor to a "black studies program" stands squarely on the shoulders of his work.

Basic Mechanisms

On September 9, 1915, Dr. Woodson organized in Chicago with a small group of

interested persons, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and continued as its director for 35 years. In 1916 he published the first number of the *Journal of Negro History* and served as its editor until his death. This scholarly periodical, an essential source for all students of black history, is now in its 55th volume. Dr. Arthur M. Schlesinger, the Harvard historian, commented that Dr. Woodson had "enlisted the interest and talents of historians of both races and maintained exacting standards of research and presentation which made the *Journal* rank with the best learned periodicals of the country."

In 1920 Dr. Woodson founded the Associated Publishers, Inc., through which an uninterrupted succession of books on Negro history by himself and others has made information on the background of the Negro available to everyone. He felt that "the achievements of the Negro, properly set forth will crown him as a factor in early human progress and a maker of modern civilization."

Negro History Week, still observed, was initiated by Dr. Woodson in 1926 as a bold experiment designed to reach the large

* Reprinted by permission from *Journal of the National Medical Ass'n*. Vol. 62, No. 5, Sep. 1970.

** Distinguished Professor of Anatomy, Howard Univ. College of Medicine; physical anthropologist, writer, medical editor.

* *The Profession of the Law*, 1886.

public untouched by the impact of the scholarly *Journal*. This was an instant success. It popularized the study of its subject and created a demand for a smaller periodical written for the average reader. This need was filled by the inauguration of the *Negro History Bulletin* in October 1937. This magazine appears nine times a year during the school months.

Thus in establishing an association to promote the study of Negro history, a journal to publish research on the subject, a publishing firm to produce books not sought by other houses, a Negro History Week to popularize the subject and a Negro History Bulletin for general lay consumption, especially in the public schools, Dr. Woodson created a mechanism to cover each kind of activity which had to be encompassed. This in itself was substantial achievement.

Early Books

The meticulous thoroughness manifest in Dr. Woodson's Harvard doctoral dissertation of 1912, "The Disruption of Virginia," stamped the books which were to be the foundation stones upon which the work of the ASNLH was to be built. In 1915 came, "The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861," followed by, "A History of Negro Migration," 1918; "The History of the Negro Church," 1921; and, "The Negro in our History," 1922. The latter a textbook now in its 11th edition, has sold more than 100,000 copies and "undoubtedly influenced the thinking of more students than any other publication dealing with the Negro."

Along came, "Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," 1925; "The Story of the Negro Retold," 1928; "African Myths," 1928; "The Negro Wage Earner," 1930 (with Lorenzo Greene); "The Mis-Education of the Negro," 1933; and "African Heroes and Heroines," 1939.

Attention to Medicine

In natural course the professions, and especially medicine, would demand special study in the scope of Dr. Woodson's researches. Dr. George Cleveland Hall of Chicago had served as chairman of the organization meeting of the ASNLH and afterward as its first president, Dr. Hall was the leading Negro physician in Chicago for three decades, 1900-30. He was also a close friend of Booker T. Washington and vigorously active in any program which he felt would be for the betterment of the welfare of Negroes. Dr. Hall helped Dr. Woodson interest Julius Rosenwald in giving modest early support to the Associa-

tion for the Study of Negro Life and History. It is significant that Dr. Hall's associate at Chicago's Provident Hospital, Mr. A.L. Jackson, was one of the co-founders of the ASNLH. The others were W.B. Hartgrove and J.E. Stamps.

The professions first received attention in Dr. Woodson's book published in 1934, "The Negro Professional Man and the Community—with Special Emphasis on The Physician and The Lawyer." This work is noteworthy in many respects.

First of all, it was sound and thoroughly modern in concept, viewing the professionals—teachers, preachers, nurses, pharmacists, nurses, dentists, lawyers, actors and showmen, musicians and teachers of music, authors, editors and reporters, social welfare and religious workers, and painters, sculptors, architects, photographers and inventors—not as separate entities, but as parts of the communities which produced them and those in which they came to serve.

The book was based on data collected by Dr. Woodson and his staff over five years, 1928-33. The area covered included all the large cities with a considerable Negro population. Five field investigators were employed who "went in their cars from town to town in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Kentucky, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri." Dr. Woodson consulted official sources of data such as census reports and the like, but was not dependent upon them and frequently showed them to be in error. Here a generation ago a black scholar was executing a black-conceived and black-controlled black studies program which the myriad current workers in this field would do well to emulate.

Dr. Woodson's already tremendous background enabled him to interpret his data with the sure hand of authority, writing always in a clear, concise style. He stated that, "The study of the Negro in the professions cannot be an isolated effort. To know these classes we must understand the environment in which they live. . . . Herein the author is not particularly concerned with how much medicine or law one knows, but with what he does with what he has acquired; not so much with the question as to how great a physician or lawyer he may be as with how useful a man he is in the community.

Because physicians were the most prosperous of the Negro professionals they received very careful, detailed attention. The basic data were derived from questionnaires and interviews from 1,051

physicians, 656 dentists, 625 nurses, 388 pharmacists and 503 lawyers. The writing shows that Dr. Woodson understood the nature of his sample and how to handle it. This book should still be *must* reading for every Negro physician as well as any student of black history, because its updating would require essentially quantitative rather than qualitative changes. Names are not mentioned except for early historical figures. The focus is on the physician as a part of communities. He is treated under the chapter headings, "Physicians in Ascendancy," "The Practice of the Physician," "Economic Connections of Physicians," and "Social Contacts and Uplift." The closing section of the latter chapter, "Contributions," gave Dr. Woodson the most trouble, as it would today. However, he made an objective summary of the information he could get. He found frequent mention of the Journal of the National Medical Association as a medium for the Negro author.

"The Negro Professional Man and the Community," might be said to have today the stature of a Flexner report with the advantage that it was written by one who thoroughly understood the conditions he described and the disadvantage that no great reforms followed its publication. The forces which could have effected change were not interested and few of those most concerned bothered to read the book. It is highly recommended for current perspective.

The First Negro Medical Society

In 1939 the present writer published through the Associated Publishers, Inc., a little book, "The First Negro Medical Society: A History of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, 1884-1939." The edition of 1000 copies was sold-out by the end of 1950, but the new interest of the present in anything on black history has stimulated numerous requests for copies which could not be supplied. Without Dr. Woodson's sound advice and helpfulness, this book would never have appeared at all.

On May 23, 1935, I found myself suddenly recording secretary of the Medico-Chirurgical Society. I had come late to its annual business meeting. Election of officers was in progress, the position of recording secretary had been reached and four nominees had declined. On arrival I was glimpsed passing the front door of the assembly room. As I entered by the rear door I was advised that I had just been elected recording secretary. Before protest was possible the meeting was adjourned.

My secretarial predecessor immediately brought over the current minute book and a well-stuffed brief-case which, he stated, represented the complete files of the Society. He spoke truly. The documents transferred consisted on one notebook of minutes in long hand, one notebook of typed minutes and the brief-case stuffed with correspondence and miscellany. These were the total archives of the Society in its 51st year.

In the months that followed spare moments were devoted to examining this material. The minutes did not precede the year 1920. The correspondence in the brief-case was stratified in archeological layers, each layer representing the total correspondence received by one secretary and stuffed in on top of that of the preceding. The whole was undisturbed by any intrusion burials.

From this fragmentary information and a notation in Lamb's, "History of the Medical Department of Howard University," it became apparent that the facts surrounding the birth of the Society might constitute a story of national and current interest. After prolonged spare time research in the Surgeon General's Library, now the National Library of Medicine, enough facts were assembled for a representative manuscript which was prepared and presented to the Board of Governors of the Society for publication in mimeographed form and distribution to the membership.

The Board took the matter very lightly. They said it was nice that I had done this work, but the mimeographing would be too expensive. Thoroughly aware that my co-professionals had little appreciation of scholarship, I was a bit surprised that so modest a suggestion was not accepted. I then took the manuscript to Dr. Woodson, a friend of many years, for an opinion. He said that the work should be brought out as a hard cover book and that the book would be appreciated much more outside the membership for which it was written than within it. He was so right.

Dr. Woodson said that the Associated Publishers would produce an edition of 1000 copies for \$650, of which half was to be paid on submission of the manuscript and the other half when the book was off press, prior to delivery. He said \$2.00 a copy would be reasonable and that the Society would realize an eventual profit. I took this information back to the Board of Governors of Medico-Chi, feeling that the prestigious opinion of Dr. Woodson would mean something. They were unimpressed. Their words were very endearing. One said that he saw no need for any book. If the

manuscript were to be published at all, mimeographed form and a distribution to the membership was all that would be indicated. Another commented that he saw no particular contribution in this sort of thing, that Dr. Cobb just wanted to see his name on the back of a book and that was all. After a long, rough session in which similar tender sentiments were expressed, the Board voted a contribution of \$150, take it or leave it, for production in any form I chose.

At that time I did not have the \$175 in cash to make up the balance of the necessary down payment. My salary was \$3,500 a year as full-time associate professor of anatomy at Howard University with no other income, and my transportation was an ancient Hupmobile which the brethren were suggesting I turn over to the Smithsonian Institution. With two small children there was little to spare. Yet I managed to scrape together the down payment and signed the contract for the 1000 copy edition with Dr. Woodson.

When the page proofs became available, I button-holed the members of the Society individually for \$2.00 in advance on the evidence of the proofs, and thus secured nearly enough for the second payment by the time the book was off press.

I came thus to own the edition which I had tried to give to the Society. Dr. Woodson distributed about 200 copies for reviews and other promotional purposes and I gave away over 100 more. The Associated Publishers sold the remainder on order at \$2.00 a copy, of which one half came to me. When the supply was exhausted I had made a net profit of \$383.34. This came without effort after the book was published, but the brethren really put me through the wringer beforehand.

Incidentally, in discussing with Dr. Woodson a chapter in the book, "Publications by the Society and Members," I had asked him specifically if it would be better to list the publications of each member as I had done, or make a narrative summary. He was most insistent that the listing be left as it was and said that that was one of the most valuable parts of the book. This recalled to me the difficulty he himself had had with the section on what contributions Negroes had made to medicine in his own 1934 book on the professions.

Personal Contacts

While "The First Negro Medical Society" was going through press, there was occasion to see Dr. Woodson frequently. These contacts were an enriching experience, greatly expanded in subsequent years. It was convenient in 1943 to drop in

on him often while a paper I had written for one of his programs during the annual meeting of the ASNLH in 1942 was being published in the *Journal of Negro History*. This paper, "Education in Human Biology: An Essential for the present and Future," was not history in the limited sense, but Dr. Woodson agreed that the perspective I was using on man was both historical and timely. He freely gave me all the pages needed in the *Journal*, which also covered the costs of the cuts. It is interesting that in the spring of 1970, a distinguished anthropologist who is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, suggested that I revise that paper for up-dating and bring it out again. He thought the need for dissemination of the theme was greater than ever. Again Dr. Woodson had been correct in appraising the potential value of a manuscript I had submitted to him.

It had been my good fortune to have known Dr. Woodson a long time. We came to Washington's new Dunbar High School together in 1917, I as a freshman of 12 and he as a teacher of history of 42. Although I was never in his classes. I got to know him informally and to hold him in high esteem. It was customary at that time for each teacher to stand in the hall outside of his or her room while pupils were changing classes. This presence influenced orderly passage. When Dr. Woodson stood so posed, the quiet, unsmiling dignity of his figure commanded good order. His erect carriage, broad shoulders and sturdy chest, developed during his days in the coal mines of West Virginia, indicated the rugged strength that carried him through his long career. His reserved, independent demeanor never changed in the 33 years I knew him.

The impression of sternness which one might have on first acquaintance was soon dispelled in any conversation with Dr. Woodson. I used to see him fairly often in the early thirties after I had joined the medical faculty at Howard. He was very alert to what Dean Numa P.G. Adams was trying to do and interested in my own work. He always talked very freely and fully to me. In the course of several years and many hours of conversation, he spoke without reservation of his whole life—his goals and trials and tribulations, and much history that he had come by but would not publish. My gain has been as much from his wisdom as from his writings.

Early Life

Dr. Woodson was born on December 19, 1875, at New Canton, Buckingham County, Virginia. His parents, James and Eliza (Riddle) Woodson, had been slaves.

The family was large and poor and Carter could not regularly attend the schools available; but he mastered the elements of common school subjects by the time he was 17, largely self-taught. He and his brother, Robert Henry, moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where Carter hoped to further his education, but he was forced to earn his living as a miner in the Fayette County coal fields. He was nearly 20 before he was able to enter the Douglass High School in Huntington in 1895. There he obtained his diploma in two years. After two years of study at Berea College, Kentucky, then well-known for its acceptance of both white and black students, this institution awarded him the Litt.B. in 1903. He had begun teaching school, in Winona, W.Va.

In 1900 he had returned to Huntington High School as its principal. In 1903 he left this post to serve four years in the Philippines as a supervisor of schools. There he became fluent in Spanish. With characteristic determination, he continued his education by returning in the summers to the United States for study at the University of Chicago from which he received the A.B. in 1907 and the A.M. in 1908. He also spent a year of study in Asia and in Europe, including a semester at the Sorbonne where he gained fluency in French.

Critical Years

In 1909 he came to Washington, D.C. as a high school teacher and was assigned courses in French, Spanish, English and history. He pursued his historical research incessantly at the Library of Congress. By 1918 he had completed his Harvard doctoral dissertation, published two books and organized the ASNLH. He was made principal of the Armstrong High School in that year and his reputation had so grown that in 1919 he was called to Howard University as dean of the College of Liberal Arts. He remained in this position but a year and his employment was terminated when he refused to apologize in writing to the president of the University, Dr. J. Stanley Durkee, as required by the Board of Trustees. There is nothing in the record to indicate the circumstances concerned. Neither Dr. Logan nor the present writer ever heard Dr. Woodson mention the matter.

Certain facts, however, suggest the atmosphere in which Dr. Woodson found himself working. The period 1919-24 was a "Red Scare" period. A member of Congress complained in January 1920 about a pamphlet in the Howard Library, "Seventy-Six Questions on the Bolsheviks and

Soviets," and stated that if that book were read by students, he would "never vote for the appropriation of another dollar for the institution." President Durkee had the book removed from the Library.

Dr. Woodson had undoubtedly gone to Howard with zeal for the promotion of the study of Negro history and especially the development of a graduate studies program. The period of what has been called the Negro Renaissance was on the rise. This era is well reflected in Dr. Alain Locke's book "The New Negro, An Interpretation." The public climate was thus ripe, but the University attitude was extremely conservative. In 1915, the year in which Woodson founded the ASNLH, the Howard Board had rejected a proposal by Dr. Locke for a course in "inter-racial history," and a later proposal emanating from the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences for a course dealing with Negro problems was rejected by the Board in 1916 with the language, "The committee thinks it inexpedient to establish a course in Negro problems at this time." There was no explanation.

It is certain that Dr. Woodson had pushed hard for his goals. President Durkee had had several clashes with faculty and was known to have called people names. If in the course of a disagreement with Dr. Woodson harsh words were used, it is equally certain that Dr. Woodson gave as good as he got.

The next year, 1920, he accepted a position as dean at West Virginia State College. Here he organized the Associated Publishers, but realized that school administration was not for him, involving too many petty problems for a man of his interests.

Rubicon Crossed

In 1922 he cast his die and returned to Washington, to devote the remaining 34 years of his life entirely to the work to which he had dedicated himself. He had no assured income or prospects of success beyond his own unwavering faith in his cause.

He purchased the row house at 1538 Ninth St., N.W., where the ASNLH and Associated Publishers still have their headquarters, lived on the third floor and turned over the two lower floors to the work of the Association. It was generally believed that he could not succeed and friends were not particularly encouraging or kind. He told me of many individuals, who should have known better, who ridiculed his efforts at the start.

His ambition was an Encyclopedia Africana which would be an *opus magnum*

covering everything. How foolish for him to attempt such a project without resources. Was not a well-heeled foundation going to do the same thing. Even his brilliant contemporary, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, an independent personality himself, did not think he would succeed. DuBois planned a comprehensive work similar to Woodson, and there would have been room for both, but he applied to one of the great foundations for financing, and was finally turned down. Professor Rayford Logan in a recent Distinguished Lecture series at Howard, stated that years afterward a key person of this foundation revealed that the reason DuBois was not given the grant was that they simply did not want a work of this kind to be done by a Negro.

Dr. Woodson never got his encyclopedia out either, but he had worked on it little by little over many years. He showed me more than once the ordered accumulation of documents he had assembled for this. They filled at that time about twelve feet of shelf space. Why should this work not be completed?

Arduous Years

About six years after Dr. Woodson's independent work was started and his competence, the seriousness of the ASNLH and the quality of its Journal were clearly established, he did succeed "in obtaining a grant of \$25,000 from the Carnegie Corporation; later, two of \$25,000 and \$37,000 from the Laura Spelman Memorial; and still later, a total of \$32,500 from the Rockefeller Foundation given on condition that the sum be matched elsewhere." Soon thereafter Thomas Jesse Jones, educational director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, launched an attack upon Dr. Woodson in which he was joined by Dr. Anson Phelps-Stokes, because Woodson had directly criticized Jones' African policy. By 1930 these detractors had succeeded in lopping off all support of the Association from boards and foundations.

Nevertheless the ASNLH survived; even though the Association was forced to present its case to the Negroes of the country and appeal to them for assistance in the midst of the great Depression. Dr. Woodson pointed out that as long ago as 1944 the Association was earning its own income and paying its way. He considered this its greatest achievement and gave full credit to the sacrifices made by the staff and to those who cooperated in the prosecution of the long-neglected work."

The Director set the shining example. Langston Hughes wrote that, "In the mid-1920's, when I worked for Dr. Woodson,

he set an example in industry and stick-to-it-tiveness since he himself worked very hard. He did everything from editing the *Journal of Negro History* to banking the furnace, writing books and wrapping books. One never got the idea that the boss would ask you to do anything that he would not do himself. His own working day extended from early morning to late at night. Those working with him seldom wished to keep the same pace. But he always saw that we had enough to do ahead to keep our own working hours entirely occupied."

The quarters of the ASNLH at 1538 Ninth St., clearly showed the difference between form and substance. There was no money to spend on renovations so none were made. No one would scoff at the unpainted front or bare wooden floors, because the volume and quality of work done in the house made any external trappings insignificant.

Dr. Woodson had no aversion to the ladies but never married. He said he could not afford a wife. He even cautioned me against over-doing it in my earlier years, saying, "You have a wife and children, Dr. Cobb, and you can't live like I live. I am a coal miner and I can take almost anything."

Despite the Spartan austerity of his daily routine, he knew how to interweave gracious interludes. He would often dine at the Phillis Wheatley Y.W.C.A. at the next corner and linger afterwards in the lobby, sitting and chatting with the young ladies who resided there. They paid great tribute to the richness and entertaining quality of his conversation and on his passing wrote, "We can appreciate just how fortunate we have been to have shared a close friendship with such a lofty soul, a profound scholar, a perfect gentleman and a distinguished American, for so many days in such a fine atmosphere.""

Dr. Woodson lived a full life and was in constant demand as a speaker. A number of schools have been named for him. His bride was truly the Association and to her he left his worldly goods and his files. It was found after his death that the Association owed him a considerable amount in salary which he had never seen fit to collect. The Association needed it more.

Epilogue

The month of April 1950 was tragic for Negro Americans. In the short space of three weeks, three outstanding leaders died. All were Washingtonians and each received the Spingarn Medal of the NAACP for his contributions.*

On April 1, Dr. Charles Richard Drew was killed in an automobile accident at 46.

*The Spingarn Medal was awarded to Dr. Carter G. Woodson in 1926, to Dr. Charles R. Drew in 1944, and, posthumously, to Atty. Charles H. Houston in 1950.

On April 3, Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson came to the end of his long and useful life. On April 22 Atty. Charles Hamilton Houston died after a long illness.

To one who, like the present writer, was a contemporary of these three men and knew them well, the fleeting nature of temporal glory was ironically evident at their funerals. Dr. Drew died at the height of his fame and the 19th St. Baptist Church was packed, with a crowd outside. The procession to the cemetery had about 120 cars. Mr. Houston had retired somewhat from the public eye, Rankin Chapel at Howard was adequate for his service.

The attendants at the publicly announced funeral of Dr. Woodson scarcely filled the lower floor of the Shiloh Baptist Church, and these were chiefly of middle age or more, although Negro History Week was annually observed in the public schools (Divisions 10-13) and the Negro History Bulletin was seen by thousands of school children. The public which was aware of the work of each of these men appreciated their stature but many simply did not know of them. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

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