

Looking back on the Civil War

Pittsburgh has a special connection to Black History Month

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By **Dr. James B. Stewart**

In February 1926 noted historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson inaugurated the annual celebration of what is now well known as Black History Month. Dr. Woodson chose February to commemorate the birth month of two major historical figures, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Over the decades the celebration of Black History Month has become a regular practice in school districts, churches and community organizations across the country. The institutionalization of the month has been spearheaded by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, founded by Dr. Woodson in 1915.

ASALH's mission is to promote, research, preserve, interpret and disseminate information about black life, history and culture to the global community. ASALH, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., supports a network of local, state and international branches and supplies a variety of educational resources.

ASALH establishes an annual theme, formally announced by presidential proclamation, to provide a focal point for Black History Month activities. Educational resources provided by ASALH this year include three posters produced by highly acclaimed visual artist Charles Bibbs and a CD-ROM of essays. These and other materials can be purchased at www.asalh.org. The 2011 Black History Month theme is "African Americans and the Civil War." Aside from promoting this subject, ASALH is supporting efforts to have Congress create a National Commission to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the most important event in forging the United States into a modern nation.

In recognition of the centrality of the Civil War in the making of American history, ASALH will devote much of its attention over the course of the next four years to promoting the sesquicentennial. The roles that all Americans played -- northerners and southerners, blacks and whites, American Indians and others -- are an inextricable part of our national heritage. This re-examination of the Civil War has the potential to inform current efforts to meet contemporary challenges posed by our nation's growing diversity. A recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that racial/ethnic minority groups accounted for 85 percent of the nation's population growth over the last decade.

Although February plays a distinctive role in ASALH's efforts to explore African-American history, life and culture, the organization has always maintained that these subjects should be fully integrated into school curricula and not pigeonholed into a single month. That's why the

organization is diametrically opposed to efforts to exclude ethnic studies from the curriculum of public schools, as was mandated recently in Arizona.

For those of us living in Pittsburgh, this year's celebration of Black History Month has special meaning. Pittsburgh has a well-established connection to ASALH and its work. Deceased historian, educator, prominent advocate for human rights and educational opportunity and University of Pittsburgh alumna Dr. Edna McKenzie was a long-time supporter of ASALH and a member of its governing body. She was instrumental in bringing ASALH's national convention to Pittsburgh in 2004.

A local branch of ASALH was organized last month in her honor -- the Dr. Edna B. McKenzie Branch of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History Inc. of Western Pennsylvania. The branch hopes to follow in Dr. McKenzie's footsteps by contributing significantly to improving the quality of life of Pittsburgh-area citizens.

Dr. McKenzie worked for years at the Pittsburgh Courier and was part of the team that carried out the "Double V" campaign during World War II, calling for victory against racism in the United States as well as victory against the Axis powers. Braving threats of violence as well as government intimidation, Dr. McKenzie and her colleagues documented discriminatory practices in housing, employment and public accommodations.

At the time of her death in 2005, Dr. McKenzie was an emeritus professor of history at the Community College of Allegheny County. Her other prominent public service included serving on the executive committee of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency. On the occasion of this year's Black History Month, I invite you to help carry on the work of Dr. McKenzie and ASALH by supporting ASALH's Pittsburgh branch. Visit www.asalh.org to become a member of ASALH and contact me at js8@psu.edu for information about upcoming meetings of the local organization.

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