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## Perhaps some day we won't need a month-long refresher on black history

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I wonder how many of us know that Dr. Carter G. Woodson is credited as being the founder of "Black History Month"?

Dr. Woodson was born to parents who were former slaves. He spent his childhood working in the coal mines of Kentucky and at the age of 20, he enrolled in high school. He graduated two years later and went on to earn a PhD. from Harvard University. Dr. Woodson was disturbed to find that history books of his time largely ignored the African-American population and would reflect their efforts only in relation to the inferior social position they were assigned at the time.

In 1926, Dr. Woodson was instrumental in establishing "Negro History Week" during the second week of February. He did so in an effort to bring attention to the contributions of African-Americans people throughout American history. He selected the month of February because Frederic Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Abraham Lincoln were born in February.

The 15th Amendment, which granted blacks the right to vote, was passed in February of 1870 and the first African-American U.S. Senator Hiram R. Revels took the oath of office in February of 1870. Black History Week was expanded to Black History Month in 1976 and is still being celebrated — and ignored — in many classrooms in our schools today.

I guess some people ask why they should have to study Black History when they are not black. I know when I was in school, there were many times when I wondered why I had to learn about George Washington and his cherry tree or Eli Whitney and his cotton gin. I was never told by my teacher that George Washington was a slave owner and Eli Whitney invented a machine that prolonged and increased slavery in this country.

My teacher told me to remember that in 1794, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. I was not told why this was important to anyone or what a Cotton Gin was, but still I remember the date. I think I even got it right on the test but it was still of no important to me at the time.

I, like many others in the 1950 and 1960s, learned the history of "White America" and very little about the contributions of other groups such as the Hispanics, Irish, Asians and others that played a major part in the building of our country. Later in life, I learned more about Mr. Washington and Mr. Whitney and I learned how to view the history of a period through the eyes of the many different groups of people who helped to make the United States the great nation that it is today.

I don't know why, but it always bothered me as to why ways bothered me as to why I had to remember that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1794. So I read up on Eli Whitney and found that he did not make much money on his invention because his patent was not upheld until 1804 and many people copied and sold cotton

gins. He made most of his money manufacturing muskets.

I also learned that cotton was not a major crop in the United States because it was too labor intensive. When cotton was harvested it would have to be cleaned of seeds and husk before it could be sold. This was a lot of work and required many hours of labor to produce a bail of cotton.

The invention of the cotton gin changed many things in 1794. Prior to that, there had been a great deal of discussion on how to reduce the number of slaves in the country.

Many plantations were well established, the land was cleared and there was no longer a need for large numbers of slaves to do the work on the plantations. However, the cotton gin changed all of that and cotton became a money crop almost overnight and more and more land across the South was being cleared for the planting of cotton.

This caused a need for more slaves and the slave population increased across the South. The increase in cotton production caused the establishment of many new textile factories in the North during the 1800s. Factories needed more and more workers to produce their products.

Meanwhile, a potato blight in 1845 caused many Irish families to leave Ireland and come to the United States to start a new life. The Irish were not welcomed to the U.S. and suffered a great deal of discrimination when they got here.

While Irish men could not find work, the women and children found jobs that offered long hours and low pay working in the textile mills.

Their efforts increased the amounts of textiles being exported from the U.S. to Europe and Asia. It soon became clear to factory owners that they could sell more of their products if they could find a faster way to get them to the West Coast and on to the Far East.

They started to push for a transcontinental railroad so they could get their products to the West Coast faster than going by ship around South America. The construction of the railroad caused a need for a large number of workers and many Irishmen signed on to build the railroad from the east to the west. Large numbers of Asian men were imported to work on the railroad coming from the west to the east.

All of these things happened in part because Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. I think I would have enjoyed history class back in 1960 if my teacher had told me why it was important to know that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin.

Mr. Whitney had an impact on African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Asian-Americans, farmers, the textile industry, the transcontinental railroad and many other groups of Americans. But all I had to learn was that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1794.

There is a great deal of history that many of us do not know:

- Did you know that Vermont was the first American colony to abolish slavery in 1777? In 1780 Pennsylvania became the first of the original 13 colonies to abolish slavery. In 1808, almost 60 years before the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865, the importation of slaves was outlawed in the U.S.

However, it is estimated that more than 50,000 additional slaves were brought illegally between 1808 and 1865.

- Did you know that, according to the 1860 census, only about 4 percent of the white population of the South owned plantations large enough to be farmed by 20 or more slaves? About 1 percent owned plantations needing 50 or more slaves. And 75 percent of white farmers did not own slaves.
- Did you know that John A. Johnson invented the wrench, William Johnson invented the egg beater, Frederick Jones invented the air conditioning unit and the two-cycle gas engine, Dewey Sanderson invented the urinalysis machine, Henry Sampson invented the cell phone, J.W. Smith invented the lawn sprinkler, T.W. Stewart

invented the mop and Paul E. Williams invented the helicopter? All of these inventors were African-Americans.

It is my hope that some day we will not need a Black History Month in February, Women's History Month in March, Asian Pacific-American Heritage Month in May, Hispanic Heritage Month in September or Native American Month in November to help teach us contributions all of these groups to the making of this great nation.

There is still a lot that we do not know about the many groups of people who are an important part of our country and its history. Because of this fact, there is still a need to celebrate Black History Month.

There is still a need to teach and to learn about each other and in doing so, help to overcome the myths and perceptions that we sometimes believe to be true about people we know so little about.

February is Black History Month, so teach or learn something new this month.

Robert C. Hillman, an East Stroudsburg resident, is Chairman of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, Monroe County Advisory Committee.