

FEBRUARY - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Black History Month

The importance of black history in America has been recognized during the month of February each year since 1926. First, it was celebrated as Negro History Week and later became Black History Month. Blacks have lived in America since colonial times, but they did not gain a respectable presence in American history books until the 20th century. The recognition of black history and the creation of Black History Month are attributed to Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who was the son of former slaves and spent his childhood working in Kentucky coal mines. He enrolled in high school at age twenty and eventually graduated from Harvard with a Ph.D. During his studies, it disturbed Dr. Woodson to discover that history books ignored the black-American population. He sought to correct this by establishing The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now called The Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History) in 1915. A year later, Woodson founded the widely respected Journal of Negro History. In 1926, he launched Negro History Week as an initiative to bring national attention to the contributions of black people. Negro History Week later evolved into Black History Month, which is still observed annually.

2. American Heart Month

Cardiovascular disease (including stroke) is a leading cause of death for men and women alike in America. One out of every three adults in the U.S. has some form of this deadly disease. Since 1963, the United States Congress has required the President to proclaim February as “American Heart Month” to increase heart health awareness. People need to understand the risk factors, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and family history. Awareness can then lead to lifestyle changes and the development of healthier daily habits. The hope is that adults will pass these better habits onto our children and eventually break the heart disease cycle that currently grips this country.

3. Groundhog Day

The legend of Groundhog Day stems from an ancient belief that hibernating creatures can predict the arrival of springtime by their emergence from their dens. German immigrants known as the Pennsylvania Dutch brought the tradition to America in the 18th century. Over time, it developed into an annual celebration held on February 2nd in the United States and Canada. According to folklore, if it is cloudy when the groundhog comes out of his burrow, winter will soon end. If it is sunny and the groundhog sees his shadow, winter weather will continue for six more weeks. The largest Groundhog Day festival is held in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Many people gather there every year on Gobbler’s Knob, a wooded knoll just outside the town, to see what the groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil will do. Approximately 90% of the time, Phil sees his shadow. Phil started making his predictions in 1887 and has become an American institution. Area residents claim he has never been wrong.

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4. Henry “Hank” Aaron

Henry Aaron, better known as Hank, was born on February 5, 1934, in Mobile, Alabama. He played professional baseball for 23 years as an outfielder for the Milwaukee Braves (changed later to the Atlanta Braves) and the Milwaukee Brewers. Aaron was the first to surpass the 714 career home-run record of Babe Ruth and kept the title of the home-run king until Barry Bonds passed his 755 record in 2007. Aaron still holds many of baseball’s most distinguished records, such as most runs batted in (2,297), highest total bases run (6,856), and most years with 30 or more home runs (15). After retiring as a player, Aaron became executive vice-president for the Atlanta Braves, where he has been a leading spokesman for minority hiring in baseball. He was elected to baseball’s Hall of Fame in 1982. His autobiography, I Had a Hammer, was published in 1990.

5. Thomas Edison

Thomas Edison was born on February 11, 1847, into a middle-class family in Milan, Ohio. It became evident early in his life that he was extremely intelligent and inquisitive. His public school teacher was unable to cope with his incessant questions, so Edison’s mother homeschooled him. His appetite for learning was insatiable, however, and he advanced so quickly that his parents hired a tutor to assist with the subjects that were beyond their capability. Edison went on to become one of the greatest inventors of all time. He was granted 1,093 United States patents, the most ever issued to any individual. Perhaps his greatest contribution was the invention of the first successful electric light bulb. He also invented the phonograph and made improvements to the telegraph, the telephone, and motion picture technology. Edison was a shrewd businessman and created companies worldwide for the manufacture and sale of his inventions. Along with other manufacturing pioneers of his era, Edison helped make the United States a world industrial power.

6. Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. He studied diligently to learn all he could while he worked hard in a variety of jobs. He became a lawyer and rode the circuit of courts for many years. His law partner said of him, “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.” Lincoln served four successive terms as an Illinois State legislator and one term as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He went on to become the 16th president of the United States. He presided over a very tumultuous time in this nation’s history. The states were embroiled in a conflict over slavery and secession that led to the Civil War. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation that declared the slaves forever free. In honor of his leadership during a pivotal point in American history, Abraham Lincoln’s birthday is celebrated annually.

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7. National Canned Food Month

The process of canning has been used to preserve food for over 100 years. If properly stored, canned goods can sometimes last for years. At first, glass jars were used, but because they were breakable and did not travel well, other storage materials were considered. The canning process evolved, and people learned how to seal foods inside tin cans. This later led to the use of the steel cans we have today. The Canned Food Alliance, a coalition of suppliers and manufacturers, is responsible for initiating February as National Canned Food Month. At this time, each year, many organizations host canned food drives to stock local food pantries, which play a vital role in feeding the hungry. When people fall on hard times and need a little help, donating canned foods is a kind and caring way to do your part.

8. Galileo Galilee

Galileo Galilee, who is more widely known as simply Galileo, was born in Italy on February 15, 1564. He was a scientist and an astronomer whose achievements include building the first high-powered telescope. He was the first to use the telescope to study the skies. In light of his study, he theorized that the planets revolved around the sun and not around the earth. This idea was so contrary to the belief of his time that it led to him being denounced as a heretic by the church in Rome. Galileo's theory, of course, was eventually proven to be correct, and the Vatican officially recognized the validity of his work in 1993. While others had invented very low-powered telescopes before Galileo, he refined and improved the idea to such a degree that he is generally considered the inventor of the modern telescope.

9. National Pet Dental Health Month

According to the American Veterinary Dental Society (AVDS), over 85% of dogs and cats exhibit signs of oral disease already by the age of four. Food particles and bacteria build up in their mouths and form plaque and tartar, which lead to gingivitis. If untreated, gingivitis progresses to periodontal disease, which may result in tooth decay and loss, bad breath, bleeding gums, and severe pain. Poor oral hygiene for pets can also produce more serious consequences, including infection, damage to internal organs, and death. Organ damage occurs when bacteria from periodontal disease travels into the pet's bloodstream and infects the internal organs. These infections are usually treatable when discovered early enough. To highlight the importance of good oral health care for pets, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AMVA) has designated February as National Pet Dental Health Month. Pet owners are encouraged to brush their pet's teeth, provide proper food and nutrition, and take the animals for regular check-ups.

10. George Washington

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in Colonial Virginia. He loved the land and farming and disliked the idea of war. His leadership qualities, however, eventually led him to play several vital roles in the early history of the United States. In 1775, Washington was asked to serve as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. A superb general, he led American troops to victory over Great Britain during the American Revolutionary War. Beginning in 1787, Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the United States Constitution was written. In 1789, he was unanimously chosen as the new nation's first President, where he served two terms that ended in 1797. George Washington is generally regarded as the "Father of Our Country." He died at his home, Mount Vernon, located in Fairfax County, Virginia, on December 14, 1799, drawing to a close a most distinguished military and political career.