

# MORE THAN A MONTH

A film by Shukree Hassan Tilghman



Shukree Hassan Tilghman, a 29-year-old African American filmmaker, is on a cross-country campaign to end Black History Month. Through this thoughtful, humorous journey, *More Than a Month* investigates what the treatment of history tells us about race and equality in a “post-racial” America.



## FROM THE FILMMAKER:

The following is a conversation between me and a high school student who may or may not be related to me at a school that may or may not be public:

Me: "So who is George Washington Carver?"

Student: "Oh, that's easy. I know him. Everybody knows him."

Me: "Okay, who is he?"

Student: "The peanut guy. Yeah. He invented the peanut."

I want to clear something up right off the bat. George Washington Carver did not *invent* the peanut. I know "peanut" is the first thing that popped into your head when you read "George Washington Carver." It's the same with me and maybe a hundred million other people in the U.S. And it's true, the man was responsible for pioneering genetic modification in foods, most notably involving a legume called a peanut. But God—or whichever higher power to whom you may subscribe—invented the peanut. George Washington Carver, as synonymous as his name is with the peanut, is not, in fact, God. I have to start there. If I don't put that out into the world, I'm gonna have an aneurysm.

When I was in elementary school, George Washington Carver, or "G-dub-C" as I like to call him, was the celebrity of Black History Month. The man invented peanut butter and 104 other ways to consume the peanut. One hundred and four! That's like putting out three hip-hop albums in a year (à la DMX circa 1990-something ... or current Lil' Wayne, but I digress). His seemingly obsessive involvement with the peanut was actually born from a desire to empower poor black farmers. He figured that the peanut was a crop that was inexpensive to produce, did not require heavy labor to harvest, and could be modified into various tasty meals and a few condiments. It was survival food and, in some cases, could be sold at a healthy profit.

But that's not why I bring up Mr. Carver. I bring him up for what his memory represents.

Mr. Carver's achievements are up there with any great pioneer of agricultural science. But he's best known—to you, me, and most people we know—as the peanut man from Black History Month. Is that altogether bad? Maybe not. After all, history is not so valued in American society anyway. Ask most people about George Washington (sans Carver) and they'll probably spit out something about cherry trees and not lying.

But something's not altogether right about G-dub's exclusive association with February. Until a teacher pulls out a book in October and says to her students: "Today we're gonna chat about George Washington Carver..." then it seems to me like G-dub-C is getting shortchanged. His lack of presence during any other month or section of study—at least as far as I can remember—feels like someone saying that Mr. Carver's *place* is in February, that's where he belongs, that's where he's celebrated, be happy about it and shut up. When I feel that notion, I can't help but feel that this is a notion meant not only for the treatment of history, but for the treatment of people. This is why I decided to make *More Than a Month*, a documentary film that follows me on a cross-country campaign to end Black History Month.

This film, and the discussion within, isn't really about whether Black History Month should or shouldn't exist. That question has been asked and answered on both sides over and over again.

The real question is, *what does it mean* that we have a Black History Month? What would it mean if Black History Month were no more? Would black history itself disappear, never to be seen again? Or would it pave the way for a fervent new mission to ensure the inclusion of black history in education and society in all months, a continuation of the original mission that Dr. Woodson had for Black History Month?

Some say that the continued exposure of African American history can happen *while* maintaining the celebration of black history in February. I think that would be great, but I also think the time for that has passed. February is so synonymous with anything "black," that groups from television programmers to grocery stores to community institutions cannot resist the practice of using February as the month to do their "black" thing—be it having a sale or airing *More Than a Month*.

I say that *real* growth of African American history exposure cannot happen until Black History Month is deemed ineffectual to that goal. Until we Americans say, "Hey you educators, cultural institutions, media, television, and all others that participate in and/or profit from February as Black History Month, we have decided that your concentration on February has aided and abetted a dearth in the exposure of this history in other parts of the year and, as such, we will no longer condone this tradition."

Imagine that...

With Love,  
Shukree



Shukree Hassan Tilghman, Producer/Director



## THE FILM

What would happen if Black History Month no longer existed? That's the question at the heart of *More Than a Month*. An institutionalized part of the national calendar, Black History Month has become a predictable observance, when schoolchildren learn about black heroes and historical figures, the TV schedule abounds with stories of African Americans, and commercial enterprises flavor their offerings with connections—however tenuous—to black history. Filmmaker Shukree Hassan Tilghman wonders if it's time to put an end to what he feels has become a rote exercise, and to free black history from the confines of February and ensure that it is thought of as year-round, mainstream American history.

Using a light touch and sprinkling his quest with humorous dramatizations, Tilghman takes his question to black leaders and academics, to people in the street, and to his parents. His parents oppose ending Black History Month, fearing that positive stories and images of black people would disappear. From people in the street he gets a mixed opinion as he seeks to obtain signatures on a petition to end Black History Month. At the annual Black History Month luncheon sponsored by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), Tilghman corners Vice President for Programs Daryl Scott, who points out that ending Black History Month would end the longest-running celebration of American history. In addition, there are political considerations: Such a move could play into the hands of those who don't like black history.

In a sidebar, Tilghman does a quick review of the origin of Black History Month, which began as Negro History Week in 1926, launched by historian and author Carter Woodson. Tilghman travels to Atlanta, where he visits the Carter G. Woodson Archives at Emory University. There he meets with two professors of African American history who confirm that it was Woodson's intent to integrate black history into American history, a goal shared by Tilghman. In Chicago, Lewis Williams of Burrell Communications disputes the filmmaker's assertion that Black History Month is exploited by advertisers who have something to sell. Williams reminds him that companies honor Black History Month by underwriting many special activities in schools and communities.

Tilghman's next stop is Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he meets with Harvard professor James Sidanius. The professor helps him fashion an experiment to try to learn whether Black History Month causes psychological harm by limiting black history to one small part of the year. The results: Overall, the celebration of Black



History Month has neither a deleterious effect nor a positive ego-boosting effect on self-esteem. So why do people need heritage months? Tilghman wonders. He then looks in on the celebration of Confederate History Month in Virginia, where he comes to the realization that history is about power, and that a "history month" is a way to control that history, even for a short time.

The issue of controlling history surfaces again when Michele Mitchell, director of Atlanta's APEX Museum, describes trying to explain to her daughter that some of the facts in the girl's history book were incorrect. The textbook occupies a place of authority in the classroom and it was very difficult to counter the information in the book.

Tilghman's final stop is in Philadelphia, which, in 2005, became the only school district in the country to mandate a black history requirement for graduation. Controversial at first, the course requirement has been embraced by teachers and students. Liz, a high school student from an all-white section of the city, says she appreciates learning history from a different perspective, a positive attitude held by many of her fellow students.

In the end of the film, whether or not we have a Black History Month is actually not the point. The filmmaker argues that the idea that we need to have it at all speaks to a social failure to recognize that black history is American history, period. He feels that Americans must ensure that we don't *need* this special month, even if it continues to exist.

## SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN MORE THAN A MONTH

**Eleanor Vernice Siyon and Kapell Tilghman** –

The filmmaker's parents

**Daryl Michael Scott** – Vice President for Programs, ASALH

**Randall Burkett** – Professor of history, Emory University

**Pellom McDaniels** – Professor of history, Emory University

**Bragdon Bowling** – Sons of Confederate Veterans

**Michelle Mitchell** – Director, APEX Museum, Atlanta

**Lewis Williams** – Chief Creative Officer, Burrell Communications

**James Sidanius** – Professor, Harvard University

**Walter Palmer** – Educator, Philadelphia

**Sandra Dungee Glenn** – Former chairwoman, School Reform Commission, Philadelphia

**Elizabeth Janczewski** – Student, Masterman High School, Philadelphia

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Carter Woodson

Carter Godwin Woodson was an African American historian, author, and journalist who lived from 1875 to 1950. A scholar who devoted himself to the study of African American history, he founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (which later became the Association for the Study of African American Life and History). Woodson is considered the father of black history.

The son of former slaves, Woodson was largely self-taught in his early years. He earned degrees from Berea College in Kentucky and the University of Chicago, and in 1912 he became the second African American (after W. E. B. DuBois) to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Woodson taught in public schools in Washington, D.C., and at Howard University, where he served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

In Washington, Woodson became affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He proposed that the organization take stronger action to promote the causes of black people and to increase the NAACP's membership. His ideas were not welcomed by the NAACP chair, who favored a more conservative course, and Woodson ended his affiliation.

Woodson devoted his life to historical research and to preserving the history of African Americans. He authored over two dozen books, including *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), and in 1916 founded the *Journal of Negro History* (now the *Journal of African American*

*History*), which has never missed an issue. In 1926, he proposed and helped launch Negro History Week, observed during the second week of February to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Some of his contemporaries disagreed with the idea of defining black history as a category separate from American history, a controversy that continues to this day.

### Black History Month

As a historian, Carter Woodson cast an expert eye on American history. Troubled by the absence of black Americans in historical texts, despite the presence of blacks in the New World since colonial times, he wanted to bring the nation's attention to the struggles and contributions of black Americans. To that end, he instituted Negro History Week in 1926. Fifty years later, during the bicentennial (200th birthday) of the U.S., the week-long observance was extended to the entire month of February. Today, there is disagreement among both black and white Americans about the need for Black History Month. Some of their arguments – both pro and con – are listed below.

### Are We Postracial Yet?

During the 2008 presidential campaign, and after the election of Barack Obama, news reports and political commentators began extolling a new postracial period for the U.S., a time when one's race and skin color no longer matter. With a black president in the White House, some people felt that social dynamics had changed so that discussions of race and racism were no longer relevant. "Postracial," however, needs careful definition. It does not mean "postracist"; plenty of examples of racism still can be found among the citizens of the U.S. Nor does it mean that as a country we have become color-blind; race continues to be an issue in education, employment, criminal justice, and other areas of U.S. society.

While President Obama's electoral success signifies a major milestone in the history of black-white relations in the U.S., it does not mean that our country's racial problems are now behind us. Race still matters in America, and this calls for awareness and understanding of the biases that exist in our society so that serious discussions of racial disparities can take place. Color consciousness is necessary for reaching that post-racial state where we can acknowledge racial differences, respect those differences, and overcome them to create a well-functioning society.

Although we need more than a month to sort out the issues that still divide us, Black History Month could be the vehicle that propels us into an examination of the history of race relations in the U.S., along with an honest appraisal of the racial and social divisions in our country, and discussions that set us on the path to being a truly postracial society.

Sources:

[thepoliticalwatchman.blogspot.com/2009/01/we-are-not-yet-post-racial-society.html](http://thepoliticalwatchman.blogspot.com/2009/01/we-are-not-yet-post-racial-society.html); and [campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america](http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america)



## TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO MORE THAN A MONTH

A screening of *More Than A Month* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

Black history  
 American history  
 Development of history curricula  
 Politicization of history  
 History education  
 Social studies education  
 Race relations in the U.S.

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. How did you learn black history? Are there things you wouldn't know if not for Black History Month?
2. What do you think would happen if the observance of Black History Month were discontinued? Do you agree with the filmmaker's mother that positive stories and images of black people would disappear? Why or why not?
3. Do we need the various heritage and history months, such as Irish Heritage Month, Women's History Month, etc.? If so, why? What is the function of these special month-long observances?
4. Is the commercialization of Black History Month different from the commercialization of other celebrations of American history, such as Presidents' Day or the Fourth of July, when stores have special sales and other promotions? Do you think using black history as a marketing tool is exploitive, or does it help to remind the public about the contributions of black people?
5. Is slavery a dead issue, as one of the Sons of Confederate Veterans says, or does it still have an impact on race relations and the role of African Americans in U.S. society? Explain your position.
6. George Orwell said, "Who controls the past controls the future." What does this mean in light of the debate about continuing to observe Black History Month? How does it pertain to the writing and teaching of history in general?
7. Has this film affected your opinion of Black History Month? If so, explain how the film has either helped you form an opinion or changed your opinion about the need for Black History Month.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is collecting histories, stories, thoughts, and ideas for its online Memory Book. Visitors of all racial backgrounds are invited to participate. For more information, [nmaahc.si.edu/section/get\\_involved](http://nmaahc.si.edu/section/get_involved).
2. Review your children's history or social studies textbooks. How is black history handled—interwoven throughout, as sidebar information, or as a separate chapter? Find out how textbooks are chosen for classes in your school district, and express your concerns about biases or omissions you see in those books.
3. Learn about the history of African Americans and their contributions in your area (your state, county, or town). The local library or historical association may have resources to help with your search. If you would like to involve others, you might find inspiration in the Bronx African American History Project ([www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2005aug/naison.html](http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2005aug/naison.html)).
4. Help to record the wisdom of African American elders who have helped to shape American history. The National Visionary Leadership Project ([www.visionaryproject.org](http://www.visionaryproject.org)) has developed a Legacy Guide to help you work with young people to collect these valuable stories, and provides suggestions for community activities where you can share the stories.
5. Poll your community about whether to continue or end Black History Month. Use the poll results to spark a discussion about race relations in your community and how to achieve the goal of being a postracial society.
6. Drawing from some of the activities suggested above, create a proposal for your local school district or historical society to make Black History Month more effective and important as a heritage month, so that it has a deeper impact and is tied to activities throughout the year.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org), the website of the Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



## RESOURCES

### African American Culture and History

[www.asalh.org/index.html](http://www.asalh.org/index.html)

This is the website of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

[nmaahc.si.edu](http://nmaahc.si.edu)

The National Museum of African American History and Culture, part of the Smithsonian Institution, focuses on African American history as American history.

[www.oah.org](http://www.oah.org)

The Organization of American Historians has a large archive of articles pertaining to black history.

[www.visionaryproject.org](http://www.visionaryproject.org)

The National Visionary Leadership Project is a nonprofit organization that administers an intergenerational project that records, preserves, and distributes the wisdom of extraordinary African American elders (visionaries) – national figures and those known only in their local communities – who have shaped American history.

[www.asalh.org](http://www.asalh.org)

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History, founded by Carter G. Woodson in 1915, is the premier organization for African American historical scholarship.

### Carter Woodson

[www.asalh.org/woodsonbiosketch.html](http://www.asalh.org/woodsonbiosketch.html)

This is a brief biography of Carter Woodson on the ASALH website.

[www.america.gov/st/diversity-english/2005/June/20080207153802liameruoy0.1187708.html](http://www.america.gov/st/diversity-english/2005/June/20080207153802liameruoy0.1187708.html)

This is a profile of the founder of Black History Month.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carter\\_G.\\_Woodson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carter_G._Woodson)

This is an overview of Woodson's life and career.

### Black History Month / Other Heritage Months

[www.infoplease.com/black-history-month](http://www.infoplease.com/black-history-month)

This website provides a menu of Black History Month features and topics.

[www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/01/28/the-end-of-black-history-month.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/01/28/the-end-of-black-history-month.html)

This article lays out arguments for keeping Black History Month.

[www.diversitycentral.com/heritage\\_month.html](http://www.diversitycentral.com/heritage_month.html)

This website contains a history of the various heritage months.

[uds.uvm.edu/diversity\\_calendar.html](http://uds.uvm.edu/diversity_calendar.html)

This website describes the federal heritage month celebrations.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate\\_History\\_Month](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate_History_Month)

This brief article describes the scope of Confederate History Month in the Southern states.

### Teaching of History / History Curriculum Controversies

[www.historians.org](http://www.historians.org)

The archive of the American Historical Association contains several articles about history textbook controversies and the teaching of controversial topics.

[www.epi.org/publication/webfeat\\_lessons20011107](http://www.epi.org/publication/webfeat_lessons20011107)

This article from the Economic Policy Institute provides an international perspective on curriculum controversies and the teaching of history.

[teachinghistory.org/best-practices/teaching-with-textbooks/20571](http://teachinghistory.org/best-practices/teaching-with-textbooks/20571)

This article from the National History Education Clearinghouse describes how one teacher got his students to question their history textbooks.

