

## **NATIONAL HERITAGE OR RECOGNITION MONTHS**

### **FEBRUARY: African American History Month**

In 1926 Dr. Carter G. Woodson instituted the first week-long celebration to raise awareness of African Americans' contributions to history. Prior to this time, little information could be found regarding African American history. Important achievements were left out of history books, and there was a general misconception that African Americans had made little contribution to U.S. society or history. 50 years later, the week became a month, and today February is celebrated as African American History Month. The month of February was chosen because it celebrates the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, both of whom dramatically affected the lives of African Americans. Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) was a writer, lecturer, editor, and civil rights activist who escaped slavery at age 21 and went on to campaign for the abolition of slavery, establish a newspaper, and hold the office of Minister to Haiti. He was a major voice in the anti-slavery/civil rights movement of his time. Abraham Lincoln (born February 12, 1809), as the sixteenth president of the United States, issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, thereby declaring that all slaves within the Confederacy would be permanently free. Each year, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, founded by Dr. Woodson, sets the theme for the month.

### **MARCH: National Women's History Month**

National Women's History Month was established by presidential proclamation in order to draw attention to and improve the focus on women in historical studies. It began in New York City on March 8, 1857, when female textile workers marched in protest of unfair working conditions and unequal rights for women. It was one of the first organized strikes by working women, during which they called for a shorter work day and decent wages. Also on March 8, in 1908, women workers in the needle trades marched through New York City's Lower East Side to protest child labor, sweatshop working conditions, and demand women's suffrage. Beginning in 1910, March 8 became annually observed as International Women's Day. Women's History Week was instituted in 1978 in an effort to begin adding women's history into educational curricula. In 1987, the National Women's History Project successfully petitioned Congress to include all of March as a celebration of the economic, political and social contributions of women.

## **MAY: Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month and Older Americans Month**

The roots of **Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month** can be traced back to 1976, when Jeanie Jew, president of the Organization of Chinese American Women, contacted government officials in response to the lack of Asian Pacific representation in the U.S. bicentennial celebrations that same year. The observance began in 1979 as Asian Heritage Week, established by congressional proclamation. In May 1990, the holiday was expanded further when President George Bush signed a proclamation making it month-long for that year. On October 23, 1992, Bush signed legislation designating May of every year Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. The month of May was chosen to commemorate two significant events in history: the immigration of the first Japanese immigrants to the United States on May 7, 1843, and the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869 (Golden Spike Day). The diversity and common experiences of the many ethnic groups are celebrated during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month with numerous community festivals as well as government-sponsored activities.

**Older Americans Month** got its start in 1963 as a result of a meeting between President John F. Kennedy and the National Council of Senior Citizens when May was designated as "Senior Citizens Month." At that time about 17 million Americans had reached their 65th birthday, about one-third of older Americans lived in poverty and the number of programs to address their needs were minimal. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter designated Senior Citizens Month as "Older Americans Month." Today, Older Americans Month is celebrated each May to honor and recognize older Americans for the contributions they make to our families, communities and society. The Administration for Community Living, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, issues a theme for Older Americans Month.

**Jewish American Heritage Month** was proclaimed by President George W. Bush on April 20, 2006. The President said, "We celebrate the rich history of the Jewish people in America and honor the great contributions they have made to our country."

## **JUNE: Gay and Lesbian Pride Month**

In recent years, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals did not have a specific month during which to celebrate and commemorate Pride Days in the United States.

On June 11, 1999 President Clinton issued a proclamation designating June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month. In the spirit of honoring equality and freedom, the president said, "I encourage all Americans to observe this month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities that celebrate our diversity, and to remember throughout the year the gay and lesbian Americans whose many and varied contributions have enriched our national life."

The most significant June event in GLBT history was the Stonewall Inn Rebellion, a three-day protest in 1969 in New York City's Greenwich Village during which patrons protested against unfair police discrimination and harassment. It marked the first time the gay community joined together to fight for its civil rights, earning national attention and gaining a foothold in the struggle for equality.

This month is dedicated to appreciating the contributions and significance of the GLBT community, and applauding gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender pride.

## **SEPTEMBER: National Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15-Oct. 15)**

National Hispanic Heritage Month honors the culture, heritage, and contributions of Hispanic Americans each year. The event began in 1968 when Congress deemed the week including September 15 and 16 National Hispanic Heritage Week to celebrate the contributions and achievements of the diverse cultures within the Hispanic community. The dates were chosen to commemorate two key historic events: Independence Day, honoring the formal signing of the Act of Independence for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (September 15, 1821), and Mexico's Independence Day, which denotes the beginning of the struggle against Spanish control (September 16, 1810). It was not until 1988 that the event was expanded to month-long period, which includes El Dia de la Raza on October 12, which celebrates the influences of the people who came after Christopher Columbus and the multicultural, multiethnic society that evolved as a result; Chile's Independence Day on September 18 (El Dieciocho); and Belize's Independence Day on September 21. Each year a different theme for the month is selected and a poster is created to reflect that theme.

## **OCTOBER: National Disability Employment Awareness Month, National Italian American Heritage Month**

Congress, with the aim of helping disabled veterans, designated the first week of October as National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week in 1945.

Seventeen years later, the word "physically" was removed from the phrase in order to recognize the needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. In the 1970s, a shift in disability public policy led to further emendation. For the first time, it was viewed as discriminatory to exclude or segregate people because of a disability, and activists were fighting strongly for legal revisions.

As a result, the U.S. saw changes such as the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and the designation, by presidential proclamation, of a full month to increase public awareness of those with disabilities and appreciate the capabilities of the 30 million people in the U.S. of working-age who are disabled.

Various programs throughout the month headed by The Office of Disability Employment Policy emphasize specific employment barriers that still need to be addressed and eliminated. Every year the president of the United States signs an executive order designating the month of October as National American Heritage Month, in recognition of the many achievements and contributions made to American culture by persons of Italian heritage.

## **NOVEMBER: National American Indian Heritage Month**

In response to an effort by many to gain a day of recognition for the great influence American Indians have had upon the U.S., Congress designated a week of October to celebrate Native American Awareness Week in 1976. Yearly legislation was enacted to continue the tradition until August of 1990, when President Bush approved the designation of November as National American Indian Heritage Month. Each year a similar proclamation is issued. President Clinton noted in 1996, "Throughout our history, American Indian and Alaska Native peoples have been an integral part of the American character. Against all odds, America's first peoples have endured, and they remain a vital cultural, political, social, and moral presence." November is an appropriate month for the celebration because it is traditionally a time when many American Indians hold fall harvest and world-renewal ceremonies, powwows, dances, and various feasts. The holiday recognizes hundreds of different tribes and approximately 250 languages, and celebrates the history, tradition, and values of American Indians. National American Indian Heritage Month serves as a reminder of the positive effect native peoples have had on the cultural development and growth of the U.S., as well as the struggles and challenges they have faced.

## **DECEMBER: International Day of Persons with Disabilities**

Although December has not been designated a special heritage month, it does contain celebratory days that are recognized internationally. On December 10 in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The document set forth the basic civil standard of economic, political, and social rights that should be guaranteed to every person. Each December, the commitment to this universal document of rights is renewed and celebrated. In addition, the United Nations has established December 3 as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This international observance was established to promote an understanding of disability issues and mobilize support for the dignity, rights, and well-being of persons with disabilities. It also aims to foster awareness of the importance of integrating persons with disabilities into every aspect of life.