

February is Black History Month—the single month of the year when we celebrate the rich contributions of Black Americans to our history and our culture. We have Black History and Women’s History for one month of each year. It is time for an integrated approach to our history that recognizes the contributions of all people to our society , and culture. That would be something to celebrate!  
Karen Richards

“We are more alike than different.”

- Maya Angelou



Photo Credit: Declan Haun

## In This Issue

- [From the Executive Director](#)
- [History](#)
- [Racial Justice](#)
- [Resources](#)

## Did you know?

In 1821 Thomas L. Jennings was the first African American to receive a patent in the U.S. His invention was “dry scouring” which is an early method of dry cleaning.

In 1988 Dr. Patricia Bath patented her invention, the Laserphaco Probe, a device that refined laser cataract surgery. She is recognized as the first African American female doctor to receive a medical patent.

Around 1865, Benjamin Bradley built an engine capable of propelling the first small warship at the rate of 16 knots per hour. His was the first engine powerful enough to run a warship. He was unable to patent his invention under U.S. law because he was a slave.

In 1966 Constance Baker Motley became the first African American female federal judge.

Rebecca Cole graduated from medical school in 1867. She was only the second African American female to do so. After graduation she joined Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell in New York to teach hygiene and childcare to underprivileged families.

On March 31, 1870, Thomas Mundy Peterson was the first African American to vote in an election,

November 5, 2008, Barack Obama was elected the first African American president of the U.S.

In 1836, Alexander Lucius Twilight was the first African American elected to the Vermont Legislature.

In 1945 Todd Duncan became the first African American member of the New York City Opera.



## History

Reflecting on Black History Month and the many courageous acts of our ancestors, one has to wonder how we, as a human race, came so far only to sadly watch history repeating itself.

What after all makes us so different? The color of our skin? Where we are born? Who we are born to? What religion we choose or choose not to practice? Are these differences really great enough to enslave, fear, hate, or ban another human being or entire race from living freely? Are we not all of one race—the human race?

Beginning in 1619 Africans were taken from their homes, their families, their lives and brought to America for a simple reason- European greed. European laborers demanded wages to work on plantations whereas the cost of slaves was free but for the beads, cloth and guns their lives were traded for. African American slaves never received any recognition for helping to build the economic foundations of this nation. Instead they were sold like animals, beaten, raped, scarred, faced starvation, denied education, separated from their families and forced to work as inferiors. Even after being ‘freed’ from slavery they continued to face segregation, discrimination, violence, unequal education and disadvantaged economic opportunity.

Thankfully, as in modern day, there were courageous, empathetic people unwilling to turn away from the atrocities their fellow humans were facing. There were courageous African Americans and white Americans alike that rose up and pushed against the status quo, refusing to accept anything but freedom and equality for all. [Frederick Douglas](#), was born into slavery and escaped at the age of twenty. He became an inspiring speaker and writer bringing a voice of hope to others. [Harriet Tubman](#) also born into slavery, escaped at age twenty-nine to courageously lead hundreds of enslaved people to freedom along the route of the [Underground Railroad](#). [Rosa Parks](#) refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery city bus spurring a movement to end segregation of places of public accommodations. After her arrest Ms. Parks recalled that “her refusal to stand up was not because she was physically tired, but she was tired of giving in.” And let us not forget [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) who’s courage and leadership during the [American Civil Rights Movement](#) helped to achieve legal equality for African Americans encouraging peace and nonviolent resistance for freedom.

Sadly, Dr. King was murdered on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee while supporting a group of striking sanitation workers. His hope was to bring national exposure to his [Poor People's Campaign](#) for economic equality and social justice. Dr. King’s assassin may have brought an end to his life, but his dream and the Movement did not die with him. Just days after his death on April 10, 1968 Congress passed the [Civil Rights Act of 1968](#), that included prohibitions against discrimination when renting or selling housing and criminal punishment for stopping someone from exercising their civil rights.

Despite the struggles faced, knowledge gained and lives lost championing for equality, discrimination still exists. Much more work remains to be done. We all have a duty to commit to equity and social change, justice and healing.

*“Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”*

*- George Santayana*

# BLACK HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY

Photo Credit: hahamag.com

## Racial Justice Requires White People to Take Responsibility for Change

If you are a white person, how often do you think about yourself in racialized terms (i.e. I am a white person)? Probably never. Because you don't have to. Having the luxury not to think about yourself in racialized terms allows you to see non-white people as the racialized "other." This, coupled with stereotypes and an endless stream of negative media bias that demonizes people of color, allows white people to maintain their idealized, self-image of Whiteness. Until white people give up the benefits of their Whiteness, we will not solve the problem of race.

People want to believe that we are "post-racial" or that we have become a "color-blind" society. We are not and have not. Race still matters. At this point in our history, it is the responsibility of white people to step up if we are going to truly have change. People of color cannot do this alone.

Most people have heard of the concept of White Privilege. White privilege is described as an invisible package of benefits that a person has simply by virtue of being white. Because the benefits are invisible, most of us who are white are not even aware of them. Examples of white privilege are many but most provide significant financial, educational, behavioral and, equally as important, psychological and health advantages. With privilege comes power.

Racism is often thought of as an issue of personal failure. A person is either a racist or they are not based on their behavior. This is a false dichotomy. Racism is bias (explicit OR implicit) coupled with power and privilege. This combination leads to the oppression of the non-dominant group. If we are white, we are at a minimum complicit in racism, if not racist ourselves. Our society all but guarantees that result.

In what situations do you describe yourself as white? Would you be likely to include white on a list of three adjectives to describe yourself? Do you think about your race as a factor in the way other whites treat you? For example think about the last time some white clerk or salesperson treated you deferentially, or the last the first taxis to come along stopped for you. Did you think, "That wouldn't have happened if I weren't white?" Are you conscious of yourself as white when you find yourself in a room occupied by white people? What if there are people of color present? What if the room is mostly non-white?

Barbara Flagg in her law review article, *Was Blind, But Now I See*, offers these suggested questions for exposing Whiteness. By thinking about ourselves in these racialized terms, we can lessen the importance of its distinctions and become more empathetic toward people of color.

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Barbara Flagg, "Was Blind, But Now I See": White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent, 91 MICH. L. REV. 953, 972 (1993).



*“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change we seek.”*

*- Barack Obama*

If you or someone you know is a victim of discrimination or racial prejudice please contact us. If we can not provide you with assistance, we will make every attempt to provide you with a referral appropriate to your situation.

Vermont has a number of agencies and organizations working hard to educate about and eradicate racial discrimination. Together we can make change.

## Contact Us

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Visit us on the web at  
[hrc.vermont.gov](http://hrc.vermont.gov)

## RESOURCES

[Vermont Human Rights Commission](#)

[Vermont Law Help](#)

[Vermont Office of the Attorney General—Civil Rights Division](#)

[Black Lives Matter—Vermont](#)

[ACLU of Vermont](#)

[Justice for All](#)

[Migrant Justice](#)

[Peace & Justice Center](#)

[Showing Up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)](#)

[Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity](#)

[NAACP—Vermont](#)