

# "Black History is American History:" Choosing African American History Topics for NHD Projects

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## "Black history is American history."

This is a slogan that has been made popular over the past few years. In fact, it has gained so much traction that in May 2020, former Congresswoman Marcia L. Fudge of Ohio introduced H.R. 6902, the Black History is American History Act, to the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress. The bill requires that institutions such as colleges, universities, libraries, and museums include Black history in their teaching of American history to be eligible for certain grants administered by the Department of Education. The bill has been reintroduced in both the 117<sup>th</sup> and 118<sup>th</sup> Congresses by Congresswoman Joyce Beatty of Ohio.

Why would the Congresswoman introduce such a bill?

"Black history is American history, and it is under unprecedented attack," Beatty said. "Black history is crucial to understanding the complexity of our nation's past, present and future—not just slavery and civil rights. By incentivizing schools and educators to teach Black history in the classroom, we can all learn important lessons in our country's ongoing journey toward creating a 'more perfect Union' for all Americans."<sup>1</sup>

All too often, students are taught only about the African American "all-stars," such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and Jackie Robinson. Some students learn only about these and a select few others during Black History Month. They may learn an overused and, unfortunately, whitewashed view of slavery or the Civil Rights Movement. Some students may be assigned a project on the 300 uses of the peanut or have to write a paper about Barack Obama becoming the first Black president of the United States—but then not much else in African American history.

More often than not, the teaching and learning of Black history prioritizes narratives of trauma or struggle. This practice of simplifying and narrowing Black history neglects the depth and breadth of the Black experience. Many Americans never learn about the thousands of Black people, events, inventions, and stories that are integral to building the United States. Moreover, African American students crave and deserve to see themselves reflected in their learning.

How, then, can teachers, who are often bound by the confines of state standards and a lack of time, help all students discover more of the varied history of African Americans and the lessons that can help create a 'more perfect Union' for us all?

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Representative Joyce Beatty, "Congresswoman Beatty Introduces Black History Is American History Act," updated February 1, 2023, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://beatty.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congresswoman-beatty-introduces-black-history-is-american-history-act-0>.

## GETTING STUDENTS TO THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Often, when assigning a project, teachers confine students to a narrow list of topics chosen by the teacher instead of allowing students to choose what fits their interests. Usually, those are “traditional” history topics that may fit state standards for that class but, too often, are boring or irrelevant to students.

Participating in National History Day® (NHD) helps change that dynamic by giving students agency in their topic selection. The annual theme ([nhd.org/theme](https://nhd.org/theme)) is broad enough that students can find a topic relevant to them and that fits their interests or passions. When students can choose their own topic, there is far greater buy-in to participate. This, in turn, makes learning history more engaging.

It is easy, however, for students to default to the tried and true topics because they have often not been encouraged to delve more deeply and take the path less traveled. Teachers can change that by having students brainstorm five areas of interest, reminding them to think “outside of the box.” Students can be encouraged to identify activities they are involved in or areas they are passionate about, such as sports, dance, or music. Using a graphic organizer such as a funnel can then help them narrow down their area of interest to a smaller topic that fits the theme. They often will need to do some preliminary research to find the best topic for their project.

Neither teachers nor students should worry about a topic not being “historical enough.” As long as there are both primary and secondary sources to be found, it works! A good rule of thumb is that the topic should be at least 15 to 20 years old so enough sources are available to conduct meaningful research.

## DELVING DEEPER AND DISCOVERING LESSER-KNOWN TOPICS

When thinking about topics on war or military history, people often overlook women and African Americans. If they do think of those two groups, they usually go to Rosie the Riveter or the Tuskegee Airmen.

A lesser-known group from World War II was the 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion. The Six Triple Eight, as they were known, was the only African-American women’s unit to serve overseas. This group of over 800 women, led by Major Charity Adams, lived by the motto, “No Mail, Low Morale,” as they successfully worked to clear years of backlogged mail for American servicemen at the war’s end in Europe. Their efforts went unsung for 70 years after the war. The unit finally gained recognition in the last ten years and, in 2022, was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. In 2023, U.S. Army Fort Gregg-Adams, the home of the U.S. Army Quartermaster School, was renamed, in part, in her honor.<sup>2</sup>

If a student is interested in politics, Reconstruction is a great era to investigate. Many African Americans were elected to state offices in the years following the Civil War. Oscar J. Dunn, born into slavery in New Orleans around 1822, would become the first African American to be elected lieutenant governor in the United States in 1868. Further, he became the first African American to serve as acting governor in 1871. When he died in office, the Louisiana state legislature elected another African American, PBS Pinchback, to replace him as lieutenant governor. Pinchback, a political foe of Dunn, also served a stint as acting governor.

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<sup>2</sup> To learn more, visit [home.army.mil/greggadams/redesignation](https://home.army.mil/greggadams/redesignation).



**Left: Major Charity Adams and Captain Abbie Campbell inspect the 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion in England on February 15, 1945. National Archives and Records Administration (NAID: 531249).**

**Right: An albumen print carte-de-visite portrait of Lieutenant Governor Oscar J. Dunn of Louisiana, c. 1868. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (2018.62).**

## SPORTS, LITERATURE, MUSIC, FASHION, CULTURE . . . THE LIST GOES ON

A great topic does not have to be confined to politics or war. African Americans have touched every facet of the United States and its history. Many stories are waiting to be discovered and shared.

Take, for example, the 2023 NHD theme of *Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas*. A student who loves baseball could gravitate to Jackie Robinson, as he easily fits the theme by being the first African American to play Major League Baseball. With some encouragement, that student could discover a lesser-celebrated African American who also broke frontiers in baseball like Satchel Paige. Paige had many firsts, including being the first person who played in the Negro leagues to pitch in the World Series, which he did at the age of 42.<sup>3</sup>

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a writer that few know of today. Born in 1875, Nelson lived a fascinating life as a teacher, poet, journalist, writer, critic, and activist. She advocated for women's suffrage and fought for anti-lynching legislation, among other causes. Nelson was a member of the Harlem Renaissance and had a complex personal life; she was married three times and had affairs with women—all of which she spoke of in her diary that was published posthumously in 1984. Her first marriage was to Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of the first African American writers to achieve international recognition.<sup>4</sup>

Consider the 2024 NHD topic of *Turning Points in History*. For students who love music, and rap music in particular, the song “Rapper’s Delight” is a fun topic that highlights a turning point in the history of music. Released in 1979, this song by the Sugarhill Gang was not the first rap song, but it was the one that introduced hip-hop to a wider audience. It is preserved in the National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Learn more about Satchel Paige’s career at [baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/paige-satchel](http://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/paige-satchel).

<sup>4</sup> Today, Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s papers are archived at the University of Delaware. Learn more at [library.udel.edu/news/2023/02/22/from-alice-the-annals-of-african-american-activist-and-artist-alice-dunbar-nelson/](http://library.udel.edu/news/2023/02/22/from-alice-the-annals-of-african-american-activist-and-artist-alice-dunbar-nelson/).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, visit the Library of Congress’ Complete National Recording Registry Listing at [loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/complete-national-recording-registry-listing/](http://loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/complete-national-recording-registry-listing/), and view the full list of songs granted the Grammy Hall of Fame Award at [grammy.com/awards/hall-of-fame-award#r](http://grammy.com/awards/hall-of-fame-award#r).



**Left: Satchel Paige's 1949 baseball card from his time as a pitcher with the Cleveland Indians. Wikimedia Commons.**



**Right: A photograph of Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark.**

## **DON'T FORGET ABOUT LOCAL HISTORY**

An often-overlooked area is local history. Every state, city, and town has many topics that are great options for NHD projects. This local history may not only be in a student's "own backyard" but may be a part of their own family history. The student could investigate why a school is named for someone or what the name or event is behind a historical marker. Their research process could start with a bit of family lore or by looking at family photographs. Or, a student could enjoy an event in their area and decide to investigate its origin. Students can ask a local librarian to suggest local history topics related to African American history. Students can see if their local historical society can suggest collections of local primary sources.

For example, one of the most visible cultural traditions of the New Orleans area is the second line. The New Orleans second line today can be seen at the end of most weddings or other special events and on any given Sunday, but it originated during the late nineteenth century as a way for social aid organizations, pleasure clubs, or benevolent societies to celebrate a deceased person being laid to rest. It is a parade, with a brass band and the group originating the event, making up the "main line." The "second line" is made up of the people who follow to enjoy the music.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Learn more about the second line from The Historic New Orleans Collection at [hnoc.org/publications/first-draft/symposium-2021/where-do-second-lines-come-origins-go-back-more-200-years](https://hnoc.org/publications/first-draft/symposium-2021/where-do-second-lines-come-origins-go-back-more-200-years).



## RESPECTING HISTORY

Because Black history and culture are a part of the American fabric, all students should feel empowered to choose topics in African American history. It is imperative that teachers impress upon students the importance of giving every story and person the respect they deserve.

That includes being knowledgeable and aware of cultural appropriation and negative stereotypes. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines cultural appropriation as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society” and a stereotype as “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.”

Just as we would not want someone to wear a Native American headdress as a Halloween costume, students should not think it is okay to wear blackface to portray someone who is African American when doing a performance. It cannot be taken for granted that all students know this or what blackface is. Blackface is when a person uses paint or another substance to blacken their face to portray a Black person, usually in a negative, stereotypical way. About one-third (34 percent) of Americans think that it is always or sometimes acceptable for a White person to use makeup to darken their skin to appear to be a different race as part of a Halloween costume, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey.<sup>7</sup> Although these issues could most likely occur with students doing a performance for National History Day, all students doing projects on African Americans in any category should be aware.

## CONCLUSION

Working on a National History Day project can be the perfect vehicle for students to delve more deeply into the richness of African American history. With prompting and guidance, students can go beyond the usual or default topics to find lesser-told stories—and make them into ones every American can and should learn.

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Brown, “About a third of Americans say blackface in a Halloween costume is acceptable at least sometimes,” Pew Research Center, February 11, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/11/about-a-third-of-americans-say-blackface-in-a-halloween-costume-is-acceptable-at-least-sometimes/>.

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# Teaching African American History

