



from  
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Malcolm A.  
Smith**

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New York Senate



*Celebrating  
African-  
American  
History*

*A Special Report from*

**State Senator Malcolm A. Smith**

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## The Origins of Black History Month



*Frederick  
Douglass*

The idea for an annual celebration of African-American history began in 1926 when Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Association for Afro-American Life and History, initiated what was then called Negro History Week. February was chosen as the month to celebrate African-American history because it contains the birthdays of both Frederick Douglass, the noted abolitionist, orator, and journalist, and President Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Emancipation Proclamation in an effort to end slavery in the United States. Through this special observance, Dr. Woodson hoped that all Americans would be reminded of their ethnic roots, and that harmony among the country's different racial groups would develop out of mutual respect and understanding. In 1976, this national recognition of African-American history was expanded to include the entire month of February.



*Sojourner  
Truth*

## Steps Along the Freedom Trail in New York State

In 1997, the State Legislature established the New York State Freedom Trail Project to document and interpret the experiences of African-Americans, abolitionists and others in New York State in the years leading up to the 1865 ratification of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery in our country. In 1999, a Commission was appointed to carry out the mission of the project. The chronology of important dates included in this brochure comes from the New York State Freedom Trail Commission Report, which was prepared by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and which can be found in its entirety at [www.oce.nyssed.gov](http://www.oce.nyssed.gov) (this is the website of the Office of Cultural Education in the State Education Department). Under "Cultural Resources," click on Freedom Trail Project. To visit the Schomburg Center, which is part of the New York Public Library system, go to [www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org) and find the Center under Research Libraries.

**1761** — Jupiter Hammon, a Long Island slave, becomes the first published black poet in North America.  
**1785** — The Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves is established in New York City.  
**1787** — The African Free School is founded by the New York Manumission Society, and becomes a major training ground for black abolitionist leaders.  
**1796** — Members of the John Street Methodist Church form Zion Church, New York State's earliest known black church, and the Mother Church of the African Methodist Zion denomination.  
**1797** — In Ulster County, Elizabeth Baumanfree gives birth to Isabella, her 12th child born into slavery. Isabella later changes her name to Sojourner Truth, and becomes a famed guiding light of the Underground Railroad.  
**1799** — New York State enacts a gradual emancipation law, freeing black women born after 1799 at the age of 25, and black men at the age of 28.  
**1817** — New York State passes a new emancipation act stating that all slaves in the state would be free after July 4, 1827, which was later observed as "Emancipation Day" by African-Americans throughout New York.

(continues inside)

# African-Americans Who Have Made A Difference...

**Marian Anderson** became the first African-American soloist to sing with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

A fugitive slave who escaped and then worked as a merchant seaman, **Crispus Attucks** was a hero of the American Revolution who was the first to fall during the Boston Massacre of 1770.

**Benjamin Banneker** was appointed by President George Washington to the commission that planned the construction of Washington, D.C., and helped to survey the site of the national capital.

**Jane Bolin** was the first black woman to be appointed to a judgeship in the United States.

In 1955, the regulating unit for the first heart pacemaker was developed by **Otis Boykin**, who also invented more than 25 other electronic devices used in computers and guided missile systems.

In 1983, **Guion Bluford** was the first African-American to go into space.

United Nations official and Harvard professor **Ralph Bunche** was the first African-American to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

A pioneering brain surgeon, **Benjamin S. Carson, Sr.**, led the surgical team that performed the first successful separation of a pair of Siamese twins, who were born joined at the head.

New York’s **Shirley Chisholm** was the first African-American woman elected to the United States Congress.

From 1993 to 1995, **Rita Dove** served as Poet Laureate of the United States, becoming the first African-American and the youngest person ever to hold this honor.

**Charles Richard Drew**, a physician, conducted blood plasma research, and is also credited with organizing the first full-time blood bank for American soldiers in Europe during World War II.

Computer engineer **Philip Emeagwali** is credited with writing the fastest computer application program in the world, which made 3.1 billion calculations per second.

**Patricia Roberts Harris** was the first African-American woman to serve as a United States Ambassador to another country.

Explorer **Matthew Henson**, together with Robert Peary, discovered the North Pole.

In addition to serving as a Peace Corps physician, **Mae Jemison** became the first black female astronaut in 1992.

**Samuel Lee Kountz, Jr.**, a physician, developed a method to detect and treat the rejection of transplanted kidneys.

The first African-American to serve as a Justice of the United States Supreme Court was **Thurgood Marshall**.

The phrase “the real McCoy” is associated with the work of **Elijah McCoy**, an engineer and inventor credited with patenting close to 60 inventions, including the ironing board, lawn sprinkler, and a lubricator for steam engines.

Traffic engineer **Garrett A. Morgan** invented safety helmets and gas masks for firefighters, and also developed the concept of changing traffic signals.

African-born **Onesimus**, a house slave owned by minister Cotton Mather in colonial New England, is credited with launching the concept of smallpox inoculation in the fight against this deadly disease.

At the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, athlete **Jesse Owens** won four gold medals in track and field.

At a time when sugar was considered a luxury and only available to a few,

## Freedom Trail *continued*

- 1821** — The New York State Legislature restricts the voting rights of free black men, requiring that they be state residents for three years and own \$250 in property. In 1826, as a result of these restrictions, only 16 black men in New York County—out of a total African-American population of almost 12,500—were able to vote.
- 1827** — The nation’s first African-American newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, begins publication in New York City.
- 1837** — The New York Committee of Vigilance, a group formed to aid runaway slaves, announces that it has helped more than 600 fugitive slaves pass through New York City ports in its first two years. By 1840, the group had provided aid to almost 1,400 fugitive slaves.
- 1837** — James McCune Smith, New York City’s first degree-holding black doctor, opens a practice and pharmacy at 55 West Broadway.
- 1838** — Frederick Washington Bailey—a fugitive from Maryland who would later change his name to Frederick Douglass—arrives in Manhattan disguised as a sailor, and is aided by Underground Railroad station master David Ruggles in completing his freedom journey to Massachusetts. In 1847, he would move to Rochester and begin publishing the *North Star*.
- 1841** — Sixteen African-American teachers from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens issue a “Journal of Education,” appealing for improved education and equal voting rights. Also that year, free New York resident Solomon Northrup, a talented violinist, is kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana.
- 1843** — The National Convention of Colored People is held in Buffalo, and a school for black children is opened in Utica by minister and abolitionist Jermain Loguen.
- 1846** — A statewide referendum on equal voting rights for black and white New Yorkers is rejected, which would also be the fate of a similar referendum in 1860.
- 1850** — The United States Congress enacts the Compromise of 1850, which includes a stricter fugitive slave law and heavy fines for anyone caught aiding runaways. Meanwhile, the New York Vigilance Committee privately reports that more than 400 fugitives have arrived in recent months at Underground Railroad sites throughout New York City.
- 1851** — Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1849 and who would move to Auburn, New York in 1857, begins her journeys to the South as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.
- 1862** — Captain Nathaniel Gordon—the only person in the United States ever convicted of trading slaves—is hanged in lower Manhattan.
- 1863** — President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation.
- 1864** — Black New Yorkers enlist in the 20th, 26th and 31st regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops for service in the Civil War. Trained at Rikers and Hart Islands, more than 4,000 black New Yorkers fight in the war.
- 1865** — The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, ending slavery in the United States, is ratified.

*Source: New York State Freedom Trail Commission Report*