



S A N F R A N C I S C O

African American Historical & Cultural Society

Black History Month 2026

A Century of Black History Commemorations – The Society’s Role in Black History Commemorations in San Francisco

Emancipation Day Celebration

The earliest formal gathering to celebrate black freedom after the Civil War was the annual Emancipation Day Celebration organized throughout the country, but in particular in places where African-Americans lived. The NMAAHC in Washington, D. C., describes how liberation was heralded with prayer and watch-night ceremonies, shooting of guns and picnics and parties. These evolved over time into Juneteenth, officially declared a US holiday during the presidency of Joe Biden.¹

1860s’ San Francisco was a place where the African-Americans joined with their allies for Emancipation Day Celebrations. Many of these African Americans had been and continued to be active in advocacy and civic organizations promoting the rights of African-Americans throughout the State. Some had signed up for brigades to join the Union Civil War effort, though many brigades did not go to war. Many of the men and women described here had been enslaved or contraband. The great majority were free men and women, having arrived in San Francisco in the 1840s – 1860s; either having been born free, or obtaining emancipation prior to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Emancipation Day in San Francisco and California is aptly described in the Society’s 1976 Monograph, *Blacks in the West*, self-published by the Society, researched and written by various Society members who were interested in documenting the presence of Blacks in the West.²

Origins of Juneteenth in San Francisco

In the program for the Society’s Fourth Annual Musicale is an advertisement for the first annual Juneteenth Festival to be held June 19-21, 1964, sponsored by the Fillmore Merchants Association and the Negro Community. Thereafter, the Society organized Juneteenth observations and promoted those conducted in the community, particularly through the 1970s – 1990s.³

In 1985, the late Jule C. Anderson, a former Board member and Executive Director wrote a letter, “To Whom It May Concern,” noting that her father-in-law, Wesley F. Johnson, who came to San Francisco in 1915, began the celebrations in San Francisco in the Western Addition. Unfortunately, she did not include the years that these events started.⁴

Negro History Week, Black History Month / African American History Month

In 1926, Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH, now ASALH) established Negro History Week. Then, as now, the commemorations are meant to educate, uplift and advocate for the Negro and make knowledge of her presence, achievements, history, culture and life. Annually, ASALH selects a theme, implements national events and provides resource materials for use at the local level.

Negro History Week evolved over time to Black History Week and then to Black History Month (also known as African American History Month.) While the first Black History Month may have been observed at Kent State in 1970, “Black History Month” became more common nationwide during the 1976 Bicentennial.⁵

It is unclear whether Negro History Week was acknowledged in San Francisco between 1926 and the mid-1950s. The Society archives do not hold any relevant information regarding this question. In the mid-1950s, *The Sun Reporter* Newspaper organized, sponsored and reported on an annual Negro History Week observance with a contest to identify distinguished Negro leaders and organizations.

On February 12, 1956, an Annual Negro History Week Observance, sponsored by the *Sun Reporter*, was held at Third Baptist Church; the keynote speaker was a Mr. Washington, a representative of the National Republican Committee. Merits Awards were made to the 10 most outstanding clubs in the Bay Area, the 10 most outstanding citizens in the East Bay, the 10 most outstanding citizens in San Francisco, and an anniversary award to the NAACP; the man and woman of the year would be named at the event. Featured in this same newspaper, was a photo of the Negro History Week Committee with an article noting that aid to Mississippi would also be part of the Week’s observances.⁶ It is unclear at this time, when *The Sun Reporter* newspaper sponsored Negro History Week observances started or concluded – more research is needed.

The earliest Society Negro History Week Observance was held in 1957. After the Society’s organization as an ASNLH chapter and subsequent consolidation with Mr. James Herndon’s group, “The first major project sponsored was the celebration of Negro History Week, February 10-17, 1957. Negro History Week chairman was Charles L. Turner. The theme for the year was, ‘Negro History in Development of Human Understanding.’ The first program was held at the Hamilton Recreation Center on February 10, 1957. A musical recital was presented by Elizabeth Rease. Programs were held on the radio and at various churches over the city.”⁷

Since 1957, the Society has planned and conducted an annual Negro History Week, Black History Week or Black History Month observance. The theme of these events was often similar to the National theme selected by ASALH; however, from the beginning, the Society chose sub-themes and issues that resonated with the contemporary context. For example, the 1957 ASALH national theme was, “Negro History” as cited above; the Society’s theme was, “Negro History in Development of Human Understanding.”⁸

Receiving a proclamation from the city, state and federal officials figured from early years. There is evidence that Governors Edmund "Pat" Brown and Ronald Reagan were approached to give proclamations recognizing Negro History Week / Black History Month, as were the Mayors of San Francisco and state and federal legislators representing San Francisco. The 1966 proclamation from Mayor Joseph Shelley appears to be the first.⁹ It was around this time that the Society became the chief organizer of city-wide Negro History Week commemorations. The Society organized Black History Month Planning Committees made up of representatives of African American organizations, city government and departments, colleges and universities, the business community, professional groups, civic clubs and the faith community to co-sponsor, plan and implement a kick-off program in which a keynote speaker addressed the selected theme. We believe that the first kick-off at City Hall was held in 1974. Thereafter it was held at City Hall Rotunda with few exceptions from the early 1980s to present.¹⁰

At each observance, the Society presents the National Negro Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," offers a blessing or invocation from a member of the faith community, recognizes notables and invites city officials and others to provide remarks, including proclamations. Local talent, often youth, provide song, music, dance or spoken word. A keynote speaker addresses the local theme. Each Black History Month program is unique in that the local theme, corresponds in some way to the National theme, but is given in a San Francisco context.

The Society, often with co-sponsors, offered a week- or month-long series of programs, some related to the local theme, but primarily activities to educate: lectures, book readings and signings, genealogy workshops, etc.; and activities to inspire: art and historical exhibits, films, musicales, theater, the spoken word and dance. In the heyday of the African Affairs Committee, visiting African dignitaries were invited guest speakers. Well-known African American artists, writers, professors and analysts were often the center of these post "kick-off" events. The J. B. Sanderson History Club played a significant part in these activities.

Some of the more memorable Society Black History Observances were:

1960, local theme, "Renaissance Africa and the World," His Excellency William Marmon Quao Halm, Ambassador of Ghana to the United States, keynote speaker

1966, local theme, "Freedom from Racial Myths and Stereotypes through Negro History: The Truth Shall Make Us Free," Dr. Price Cobbs, keynote speaker, and others including, Dr. Rudolph Lapp, Dr. Herman J. Blake, Tom Williams, Horace Cayton, Dr. Richard Linenger, Percy Steele, Aubrey Labre, Dr. William Cobb, Wilson Riles

1968, local theme, "Black Youth in Revolutionary Change," Prof. Harry Edwards, San Jose State University, keynote speaker

1976, local theme, "Constitutional Status of Negros," Dr. Derrick Bell, Harvard University, keynote speaker

1978, local theme, "Roots, Achievements and Projections: San Francisco," Thomas Fleming, keynote speaker & note the exhibit, "Roots, Achievements and Projections," a photographic display of San Francisco's African American leaders and organizations

1991, local theme, "Educating America: Black Universities & Colleges Strengths and Crisis," Dr. Leroy Johnson, former president, Miles College, keynote speaker, & note the companion booklet listing all of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities and as well as elected and appointed African Americans in San Francisco

2004, local theme, "Brown vs. Board Education," Willie L. Brown, Jr., guest

2019, local theme, "Black Migrations: Moving Forward," Lateefa Simon, President of the Akonadi Foundation, keynote speaker & note the Society produced film, "Black Migrations"

2020, local theme, "African Americans and the Arts," Ralph Remington, Director of Cultural Affairs, CCSF, keynote speaker & note the rare exhibit of Sargent Claude Johnson art work acquired by the Society in the early 1970s ¹¹

The spirit of the Society founders, much like that of ASALH founders and current leadership, provides impetus, value and meaning in these annual commemorations. Black History Month is a vehicle to educate, uplift and advocate for African Americans, acknowledging his and her presence, achievements, history, culture, life and human dignity. ALL people can relate to and find meaning in this.

References

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- 2) Blacks In the West Monograph, "Day of Celebration" by James Abajian and John H. Dorsey, San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society, 1976
- 3) Negro Historical and Cultural Society Board of Directors' Meeting Minutes and program details, 1964, SFAAHCS Archive
- 4) Jule Anderson letter regarding origin of San Francisco Juneteenth celebrations, SFAAHCS archive, Item# 294
- 5) Wikipedia
- 6) *The Sun Reporter*, Saturday, February 11, 1958, vol. XLV, no. ?
- 7) Frances Roston-Miller, Essay on the Society's Origins, 1974, SFAAHCS Archive, Item # 533
- 8) Black History Month entries, SFAAHCS Archive, various Items #s; and 100 Negro History Week - Black History Month Themes," compiled by the SFAAHCS, 2025-2026
- 9) Negro History Week 1958 – 1969 entries, SFAAHCS Archive, various Item #s
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