



USA  
TODAY



# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

FROM BROADWAY  
TO THE BIG SCREEN  
AND BEYOND,  
ARTISTS ARE  
THRIVING



ON SALE THROUGH 2/19 \$4.95







Participants join a Banned Book Readout at James Weldon Johnson Park in Jacksonville, Fla., on Sept. 21, 2023. COREY PERRINE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

# Each One, Teach One

Black history  
'underground  
railroad' forms  
across U.S.

**Deborah Barfield Berry**

Black historians read passages from banned books last September in a Florida park. In Washington, D.C., Black members of Congress that same month hosted panels on preserving Black history at a conference. And in Pennsylvania, a 91-year-old pastor reached out to an expert in South Carolina to help his church set up Black history lessons. • They are part of a growing movement across the country of educators, lawmakers, civil rights activists and church leaders who say there is a renewed urgency to teach Black history in the wake of a crackdown on Black scholars and inclusive lesson plans. The effort has seen historians share ways others can teach Black history, churches hold history classes during Bible study, film festivals showcase Black history work and Black leaders in Congress ask museums and local institutions to help in the campaign to preserve that history.

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Jamil Davis and his 3-year-old daughter, Lolonyo, listen to speakers on Sept. 21, 2023, at James Weldon Johnson Park in Jacksonville, Fla. Organizers of the Banned Book Readout hosted the event to protest efforts to restrict the use of some books in schools focused on race, sexuality and gender identity. COREY PERRINE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

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“There’s a movement across the country to suppress the teaching of Black history,” says W. Marvin Dulaney, president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. “We have to meet that challenge head-on.”

The push to teach more Black history comes as dozens of states, including Florida, Texas and Oklahoma, have adopted or proposed measures that critics say omit important parts of African American history or limit language related to race, sexuality and gender issues in public schools. Some have also banned books, many by Black authors, that focus on race.

“There’s urgency because these histories are under assault,” says Bobby Donaldson, an associate history professor at the University of South Carolina. “The battles in Florida and elsewhere remind us that it’s urgent that we do this work now.”

### Black history is American history

Dulaney joined other historians and

activists last September in a Jacksonville, Fla., park named after James Weldon Johnson, the late civil rights activist and composer, to read passages from banned books.

It was an unusual event for scholars attending the annual conference of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Often they meet, share research and go home, Dulaney says. But last year’s conference theme was resistance, and the gathering was in Florida, a state in the national spotlight for its efforts to restrict how Black history is taught.

Dulaney says the efforts are part of the organization’s mission to accurately teach Black history. It was founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson, known as the father of Black History Month.

“Teachings and studying and promoting Black history is not about trying to make white people and white children feel bad,” Dulaney says. “It’s just a part of American history. It’s also telling the truth that has been hidden so long.”

Political battles have sparked a renewed passion to protect Black history, including books, films and historic docu-

ments.

Last September in Washington, the March on Washington Film Festival kicked off its 10th year showcasing films that highlight Black history, including the Civil Rights Movement. Robert Raben, founder of the festival, says the push to restrict the teaching of Black history in some states and localities has only spurred more organizations to act.

“I’m immensely sorry that forces who consciously don’t want us to know our history are back in (power),” Raben says. “But the unintended consequence is a huge number of people and an increasingly diverse number of people stand up and say, ‘You can’t have democracy with that kind of fascist restrictions on our past.’”

The weeklong festival focuses on lesser-known heroes and activists and stories often not told.

### An ‘educational underground railroad’

“We’ll rely on our own educational underground railroad, or in those states where we’ve got access to the curriculum

in the classroom, we’ll just double down,” Raben says. “People cannot be afraid of teaching the past. It is in our DNA that you have to know your history to know where you’re going.”

Civil rights activists and others say they must do a better job of teaching Black history in churches, community venues and homes.

Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, says his organization is exploring how it can incorporate Black history sessions in its after-school programs. Meanwhile, the civil rights organization and others have endorsed legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Freedom to Learn campaign, a movement to combat restrictions and misinformation about Black history and critical race theory.

“We are not going to stand silent, sit on our hands, and watch and not respond to this effort to degrade Black history. It is absolutely offensive to me,” Morial says. “There’s no American history without Black history.”

Crenshaw, who is credited with co-developing critical race theory, says more than 23 states have passed a ban on the way Black history can be taught, including details of the Tulsa race massacre in Oklahoma. In 1921, a white mob burned and looted homes and businesses in a Black community there and killed as many as 300 Black residents.

### Beyond schools

Last July, Faith in Florida, a coalition of churches advocating for social justice issues, launched a Black history program offering an online toolkit that includes videos, books and other resources.

Black churches have the power and responsibility to fill in gaps if educators don’t or won’t, says the Rev. Rhonda Thomas, executive director of Faith in Florida. She dismisses arguments that teaching comprehensive Black history could offend white children.

“That was ridiculous considering that Black children and Black adults have been offended for years,” Thomas says. “And nothing was ever watered down nor erased.”

Donaldson of the University of South Carolina calls the fight over teaching Black history an “awakening.” He says there are organizations that have long been teaching and researching history and building archival collections.

“People are now reminded that there is far more work to do,” he says. “We’re also reminded that we can’t simply rely on our schools to be the one portal or vessel by which we expect our children to be educated.”



