

Celebrating Black History Month in Greenville

February is Black History Month, a remembrance that originated in 1926 by historian Carter G. Woodson as “Negro History Week.” Born to parents who were former slaves, Woodson spent his childhood working in the Kentucky coal mines and enrolled in high school at age twenty. He graduated within two years and later went on to earn a Ph.D from Harvard. The scholar was disturbed to find that history books back then largely ignored the black American population, so he took on the challenge of writing them into the nation’s history. Woodson chose the second week of February because it marked the birthdays of two Americans who greatly influenced the lives and social conditions of black Americans: former President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass. In 1976, the week-long observance was extended to the entire month of February in order to have enough time for celebratory programs and activities.

Black History Month is a time to bring national attention to the contributions of black people throughout American history. The Museum would like to recognize a few of the black citizens of Greenville who have earned a place in history, both nationally and locally.

STATE AND NATIONAL

- **Reecy Davis** - Texas State Middleweight Boxing Champion in 1947 and Southern Middleweight Champion in 1948. He was ranked fifth in the nation as a boxer in that class for four years. The Reecy Davis Recreation Center, site for the Boys and Girls Club of Greenville, is named for him.
- **John Mason, Sr.** - Spent an 18 year career in the pro baseball minor league starting in 1957. Most of his playing time was spent with the Rochester New York Wings baseball team. The Greenville High School baseball field bears his name.
- **The Thomas brothers** - Jimmy Thomas was a running back for the San Francisco 49ers; Earl Thomas played for the Chicago Bears, St. Louis Cardinals, and Houston Oilers; and Mike Thomas was a running back for the Washington Redskins and the San Diego Chargers.

LOCAL

- **Jim Brigham** - Greenville’s first free slave. After he purchased his freedom in 1865, he went on to found Hunt County’s first all-black community, Neylandville, with land that he purchased from Robert Neyland. In 1888, the town started the first black school, St. Paul School which remained open until 1965.
- **Mary Jim Bryan Morris** - First woman principal in the history of Hunt County. In the early 1900s, she was principal of the Fred Douglas School, a black elementary school on East Hill.
- **L.P. Waters** - Teacher at St. Paul in Neylandville and principal at Carver High, an all-black high school which was open from 1950-1968. The pre-kindergarten school, L.P. Waters Early Learning Center, is named for him.
- **Dr. Myrna Gilstrap** - A few of her many firsts include being the first tenured black female professor at E.S.T.U. in Commerce and the first black woman to serve in a governmental position in Hunt County.
- **James A. Weatherall** - First black head high school principal at Greenville Senior High
- **Charlie Tave** - Math teacher in Greenville ISD who founded the Doer’s Club, an organization to help black children in the community. He was also the first black man to serve as Councilman in 1979.
- **Dewey Fitzpatrick** - Owned the longest-lasting black-owned business in Greenville, the world-famous Spare Rib which opened in the 1940s.

-Information from *The Blackest Land The Whitest People: Greenville, Texas* by Brenda Huey

For a relatively small town, Greenville has produced a great number of notable people, both black and white. Because of limited space, however, all the noted black “Greenvillites” and their achievements could not be listed. Black History Month commemorates Black Americans who have changed the world. We salute Greenville’s Black Americans who have changed Greenville

NOTE: The Museum’s next big project (after the new military wing is completed) will be to renovate the front half of the Weaver Wing with expanded displays and exhibits about early Hunt County. Part of these exhibits will include a more complete history of Hunt County’s black citizens.