

Remarks of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn
Federal Communications Commission
African American History Month
Washington, DC
February 4, 2015

The Struggle Continues

A wise and courageous civil rights warrior once said: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” He went on to say that “People might not get all they work for in this world, but they must certainly work for all they get.”

Frederick Douglass, one of Washington, DC’s most prominent citizens of the day, resided just a few short miles from where we are standing now. Born February 14, 1817, Douglass lived for 78 years during a time of tremendous struggle in our nation, and in the District of Columbia.

He lived during a time when our nation endured a brutal civil war, which divided families, citizens, communities. He was here when a young republic was struggling to come to terms with itself, and its glaring imperfections.

While prominent, Mr. Douglass was just one of many forbears active in the struggle for a perfect union. There were others—some known, others not well known.

- Benjamin Banneker—an astronomer, clockmaker and publisher, who chronicled his discoveries in a popular Almanac.
- Phillis Wheatley—one of the first African American poets to be widely published.
- The Reverend Richard Allen—religious leader who found the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) Church in Philadelphia.
- Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman— who rebelled nobly against injustice, and risked their lives in the quest for equality for all.
- Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Madame C.J. Walker--whose strides in education, science, business and self-sufficiency still uplift our communities until today.
- And those we know less about: Mississippi Senator Hiram Revels, the first African American to serve in either house of Congress. Thomas Jennings, the first African American to receive a patent. The Friendship Nine of Rock Hill, SC, pioneers of the “Jail No Bail” demonstration that cost them 30 days and a blemish on their record, which was finally cleared last week after 54 years.

- And let's not forget the girls and women of the various movements—those who one author aptly calls “Freedom’s Daughters”—who have never received their proper due. But for their unheralded sacrifices, we would have fewer reasons to celebrate this morning.

Most of the heroes and heroines of the struggle for freedom were ordinary men and women, boys and girls, who made extraordinary sacrifices and contributions that led to the benefits we enjoy today. And we should be mindful that the contributions we highlight as part of African American History month have benefitted all Americans. They are lessons of courage, struggle and triumph that we all should study and strive to emulate.

Our country is the envy of many because we have the ability and capacity to celebrate today in a place like this, and we should never take that fact for granted.

Some ask why we still celebrate this month. Historian, author, journalist and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, in a speech at Hampton Institute in 1921, answered in a manner that still holds true:

We have a wonderful history behind us. ... If you are unable to demonstrate to the world that you have this record, the world will say to you, ‘You are not worthy to enjoy the blessings of democracy or anything else’. Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished, lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.

So I encourage you to continue to be inspired by the many chapters of our history—from colonial days to the Civil War—through Reconstruction to the Niagara Movement—from the Harlem Renaissance through the Great Migration—from the Buffalo Soldiers to the Tuskegee Airmen—from Louis Stokes and Tidy Pickett to Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, and Charlie Sifford—from the Supreme Court to the Supremes of Motown—from the war on poverty to the war on crime—from the Civil Rights Movement to civil disobedience—from the struggles of yesterday, to the era of “Yes We Can”.

I encourage you to keep looking upwards and forward. Be not dismayed, even with the weighty challenges before us today. Keep your spirits lifted and your efforts to educate, improve and serve your communities intact. What our past has taught us is that the contributions of ordinary men and women like you and me will continue to shape and mold the landscape and future of this great nation.

And never forget that it only takes one committed person with a vision, to change the face and the fate of our world. You can be that one.

Thank you.