



# FEBRUARY FREEDOM DAYS MOMENTS IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

By JANUS ADAMS

**FEBRUARY 6**  
"As late as 1945, Portland was known as the 'Worst City in Race Relations North of the Mason Dixon Line,'" wrote Edwin W. Berry, executive secretary of the Urban League of Portland, Oregon. It was "a Northern City with a Southern Exposure." Four years later, the city had a different look and feel. But had it really changed? Hoping for a success story for their February 1949 "Brotherhood Month" issue, editors of the *Christian Register* asked Berry for an update.

Berry would cite a decline in police brutality and gains in jobs, public service, home purchases, public schools, and newspaper coverage of blacks in stories unrelated to crime and sports. Portland had a new appellation, the "Nation's Most Improved in Race Relations." But being the "most improved" and being the "best" were two different things. In 1945, Berry credited "greed, hate, and vested interests" with keeping segregation alive. In 1949, Jim Crow was down but not out. "He's a part of the great many 'bystanders'...neither a part of the forward looking citizens, nor of the reactionaries. Overwhelmingly possessed with inertia (they are) governed by tradition rather than by conviction."

So what helped create the new atmosphere in Portland? Nature and time. In 1948, a flood destroyed the nearby city of Vanport. Twenty-two thousand people had to be relocated within minutes, and there was simply no time for the Red Cross to implement segregation. Emergency interracial contact helped forge change. When labor leaders made desegregated facilities a condition for Portland's becoming their 1948 convention city, restaurants and hotels changed for the good of their businesses. Then there was the issue of vigilance. City policy was regularly decided on the "crude premise that you'll holler when you're hurt." With 300,000 individual pieces of educational material on race relations, a PR campaign to broadcast media, a speakers bureau, and library tables well stocked with handouts, the Urban League had decided to holler - loud and often.

**FEBRUARY 12**  
In 1926, Dr. Carter G. Woodson launched the first Negro History Week. For the greater part of American history, most blacks had been forbidden to read and write by law. When the laws were changed, we were still unable to read about our historic selves because historians had systematically expunged the black presence from scholarship. Standing in the shade of our own sun, most blacks neither knew the history of our people, nor knew that there was a history to be known. So successful had the "mis-education," as Woodson called it, been that those who condemned blacks as being devoid of a culture and without a past predating slavery were actually believed. Woodson sought to uplift an intellectually devastated people - reinforcing the way African Americans saw themselves by filling in the missing pages of history.

**FEBRUARY 13**  
On Saturday, February 13, 1960, inspired by Greensboro's spontaneous, successful, and fast-spreading sit-in movement, Nashville launched its own sit-ins. Just the night before, Rev. James Lawson had convened what became the sit-in movement's first mass meeting. The next morning he activated a plan in which 500 students participated. From Baptist Seminary, Fisk University, Meharry Medical, and Tennessee

patented. From Baptist Seminary, Fisk University, Meharry Medical, and Tennessee State, students descended on Nashville's First Baptist Church. Then neatly dressed rows of students were dispatched to downtown sit-in sites.

Harlem finally got its "start" with a Williams-hosted reception at the Fund. Attracting board members, fans, and funds, and the choir performed its first major concert seven weeks later. Said Turnbull, "Music is very magical, able to transform children with no more than lint in their



Photo credit: Moneta Sleet, Jr.

On February 27, 1965, a funeral cortege drove onto the grounds of Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York, bearing the body of the man born Malcolm Little, who had come to be loved, revered, feared, and slain as Malcolm X.



**FEBRUARY 14**  
On this Valentine's Day, what could be more special than the love of a child - or, better still, the love of thousands of children - in other words, the story of the Boys Choir of Harlem and its founder, Dr. Walter Turnbull.

Walter Turnbull knew the transformative power of music. It had taken him from the cotton fields of Mississippi to the concert stages of the world. A graduate of Tougaloo College and Manhattan School of Music, he wanted to share his love of music. "My childhood may have been different from the one children experience nowadays in New York City," he said. "But we share poverty and a sense of hope and a desire for better things to come." In 1967, he began a small boys choir at Harlem's Ephesus Church while teaching in the New York City schools. When a teacher's strike divided loyalties and put children "at risk" in the cynicism of the adult crisis, Turnbull taught throughout the strike. When he found himself faced with a music appreciation class of one hundred students, his choir idea came to the rescue and expanded his pool of students to audition for the church choir. But when fire gutted the church, the boys choir barely lumbered along. Then, in 1974, Turnbull was advised to set up a non-profit corporation to attract the necessary funds to nurture his idea. For that, however, he needed a strong board of directors. As chairman, he hoped to attract Franklin Williams - a former Civil Rights lawyer and ambassador to Ghana - who was then president of the Phelps Stokes Fund. Williams didn't feel the idea was right for him. But he offered to help attract others. On February 14, 1975, a seven-year-old Boys Choir of

pockets and honey in their throats into grand performers on the whole stage." His love of music had done just that. *Love will find a way...*

**FEBRUARY 18**  
Pictured on the cover of Time magazine's February 18, 1957, issue was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Montgomery Bus Boycott's twenty-eight-year-old hero. In its lead, the story touted "the scholarly Negro Baptist minister who in little more than a year has risen from nowhere to become one of the nation's remarkable leaders of men." Not only had King not come from "nowhere," as the son of a prominent Atlanta pastor-father and musician-mother he had come from the pride of a people who, 13 years later, wondered where all the promises they had suffered so much to exact had gone.

**FEBRUARY 27**  
On February 27, 1965, a funeral cortege drove onto the grounds of Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York, bearing the body of the man born Malcolm Little, who had come to be loved, revered, feared, and slain as Malcolm X. On his pilgrimage to Mecca the year before, he had found special peace, and would this day take his eternal rest as El Hajj Malik el Shabazz. As gravediggers stood at the ready to receive him, shovels in hand, the mourners said "no." They would bury Brother Malcolm themselves. They would dig a place of rest for "our prince," as he had been eulogized in poetic elegy just hours earlier by his friend, the noted actor Ossie Davis.

This is an excerpt from the book "Freedom Days". Permission for reprint was given by John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

How does it feel  
to be among those  
who didn't look  
the other way?



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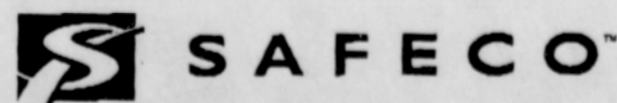
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