

Bill to Celebrate 400 Years of Black History Passes U.S. House



Rep. Bobby Scott said that African Americans have contributed greatly to the United States and their achievements deserve to be celebrated. This photo was taken during a forum on criminal justice reform in Northwest Washington, D.C. in July 2015. (Freddie Allen/AMG/NNPA)

By **Lauren Victoria Burke** (NNPA Newswire Contributor)



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In a rare display of bipartisanship in Congress, the United States House of Representatives voted to establish a commission to examine 400 years of African American history.

House bill H.R. 1242 is designed “to develop and carry out activities throughout the United States to commemorate the 400th anniversary

of the arrival of Africans in the English colonies at Point Comfort, Virginia, in 1619.”

Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.) sponsored the bill in the House and Senators Tim Kaine (D-Va.) and Mark Warner (D-

Va.) sponsored the bill in the Senate, where it’s waiting to be passed.

According to Washington insiders, the bill will most likely pass by unanimous consent

in the Senate.

Once the bill known as the “400 Years of African-American History Commission Act,” or H.R. 1242 in the House, passes Congress, it will land on President Donald Trump’s desk.

If H.R. 1242 becomes law, the resulting commission would consist of 15 members, who would serve without pay. The legislation would authorize the commission to create grants to communities, nonprofits and other groups to hold events that would commemorate the anniversary of slaves arriving in the U.S. The commission could hire staff and also accept volunteers to perform its mission. The commission would be required to submit a report to Congress and terminate in July of 2020.

In a statement about the bill last year, Kaine said that he’s been lucky to be a part of federal commissions that have been formed to study and celebrate English and Hispanic history.

“Well, if English lives matter, if Latino lives matter, then African American lives matter and they’ve mattered every day since the landing of those ‘20 and odd’ African Americans at Point Comfort, Virginia,” said Kaine.

Kaine continued: “The

story has a lot of pain to it, but it’s a story that has to be told to commemorate that we as a nation — had it not been for 400 years of African American history — would be absolutely unrecognizable. What we hope to do with this bill is engage in something we should do to tell the story in a different way than it may have been told 50 to 100 years ago.”

In late March, the Congressional Budget Office estimated, “that implementing the bill would cost about \$2 million a year—a total of \$6 million over the 2018-2021 period.”

In a floor statement about the bill last summer, Rep. Bobby Scott said that African Americans have contributed greatly to the United States and their achievements deserve to be celebrated.

“The history of Virginia and our nation cannot be fully understood without recognizing the role played by the slave trade,” said Scott. “Slavery was an abhorrent institution; but for hun-

dreds of years, it was the foundation of the colonial and early American agricultural system and was essential to its economic sustainability.”

Scott continued: “The 400 Years of African-American History Commission Act will be instrumental in recognizing and highlighting the resilience and contributions of African Americans since 1619. From slavery, to fighting in the Civil War, to working against the oppression of Jim Crow segregation, to the civil rights movement, the rich history of African Americans and their contributions to our Nation began hundreds of years ago but obviously does not end there.”

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in the United States. At its peak, the organization attracted an estimated 300,000 supporters in Chicago and across the country.

In 1933, Gordon initiated a nationwide emigration campaign, utilizing her widespread political networks in Chicago and across the Midwest. With the assistance of other black nationalist activists, she collected signatures for a pro-emigration petition. In August of that year, she mailed the petition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt with approximately 400,000 signatures of black Americans willing to leave the country. Drawing inspiration from FDR’s New Deal programs, Gordon requested federal support for those who desired to relocate to West Africa in hopes of securing a better life.

Gordon’s attempt to secure federal support failed. Yet she drew an even larger following of supporters who were inspired by her bold move. Many of these new members were women. Black women found in her organization a space

of empowerment and opportunity. They occupied a number of visible leadership roles, working alongside the organization’s female founder.

Celia Jane Allen, a Black woman from Mississippi who had relocated to Chicago, was one of these women. In the mid-1930s, she became an active member of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia. Embracing Gordon’s vision for unifying Black people in the U.S. and abroad, Allen took on a leadership role in the organization. In 1937, she became one of the national organizers. From the late 1930s to the mid-1940s, Allen traveled extensively throughout the South, visiting local homes and churches to recruit new members and advocate the relocation to West Africa. By the end of World War II, she was successful in getting thousands of black

southerners to join the movement and embrace black nationalist ideas.

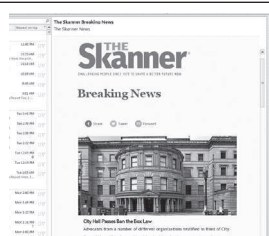
Today, these women’s stories are largely absent in popular accounts of Black nationalism. More often than not, the assumption is that men exclusively established and led Black nationalist organizations. This could not be farther from the truth. As these few examples reveal, women were key players in Black nationalist movements, and their efforts helped to keep Black nationalist ideas alive in U.S. politics. No history of Black nationalism is complete without acknowledging women’s significant contributions.

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