

# William Howard Day: A midstate civil rights leader forgotten by time

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Since 1976, Black History Month has remembered important people and events in the history of African-Americans. Yet some of the most important black participants have not had their stories recognized. Historic locations and neighborhoods have been lost in city beautification projects, and the lasting effect of racism has kept many unheralded heroes marginalized.



William Howard Day

Today, I make a plea to the powers-to-be to add William Howard Day to the list of honored African-Americans.

Day (1825-1900) made enduring contributions that helped cement the nation's long-winded civil rights campaign. Like so many others during his incredibly busy age, Day was involved in almost everything: abolition, AME Church, Reconstruction, Odd Fellows, desegregating public schools, even politics.

But unlike most African-American men of the 19th century, Day was formally educated as a public school student in New York and Massachusetts. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Oberlin College. Day was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree from Livingstone College. He was a Latin professor and spent four years as a superintendent of Freedmen's Bureau schools in Maryland and Delaware.

Later, as a resident of Harrisburg, Day was a six-term member of the school board of directors, serving as president two of those years — a position that made him the first and only African-American school board president in the country.

When William Howard Day breathed his last at 6:40 in the morning on Dec. 3, 1900, The Harrisburg Patriot wrote "One of America's leading Negroes has died after a long illness of complicated diseases." The paper

mourned, "He stood high among the leading men of his race and had a varied and successful career in many walks of life."

Day was nearly canonized by all during the decades after his death. Elementary schools were named after him in Bradford, Ontario and Harrisburg. Also in Pennsylvania's capital city, a cemetery and housing neighborhood bear his name.

William Henry Ferris of the Negro Society of Historical Research called Day "a scholar" with "finished eloquence." Civil rights champion W.E.B. Du Bois contended that Day was "one of the few colored men of this country who are capable of appreciating the antislavery cause."

Day was 75 when he died, having witnessed three eras. One of King Cotton, spawned by Eli Whitney's cotton gin that was responsible for increasing the production of slave labor, and which prompted the legalization of the slave trade in the country. The second era was that of abolitionism; a moral battle between abolitionists and slave owners, which was bookended between the

advent of the Underground Railroad and the first shots of the Civil War. Finally, Day labored for 44 years in post-emancipation United States.

With his passing, the living memory of the first civil rights movement faded into the realm of history, but his torch had been passed on to a new generation of civil rights workers: Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles Houston and The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

When King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 to deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech, he was marking the 100th anniversary of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The event has gone down as the first civil rights march on Washington.

However, 98 years earlier, the first, generally omitted, march on Washington occurred on July 4, 1865, when more than 10,000 newly freed slaves stood on the back lawn of the White House to listen to the words of Day. It also was the first time that Black Americans celebrated the Fourth of July. Day was as enthusiastic over a public demonstration as anyone.

“We meet,” Day proclaimed, to celebrate “new hopes, new prospects, new joys and in view of the nation.” That event fell on the forefront of every future civil rights demonstration — Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, even Washington, D.C. As did the Rev. King, Day had an intuitive sense of the world and a deep knowledge about the thoughts of people of his day and race. Their times were different, but each emerged as repositories for the desires of a confused nation.

Not all things, however, between King and Day were so similar. King was murdered at 39 while Day died from complications caused by a stroke when he was 75. Nonetheless, Day is the progenitor of the civil rights movement. And remembrances such as Black History Month should bring his legacy full circle.

In May 1950, Du Bois keynoted an address at the commemoration of Day’s grave site in Harrisburg. “It is our duty,” Du Bois challenged his listeners, “as men and women living in this new day to understand and understand thoroughly what has taken place since the death of William Howard Day.”

Starting today, I ask that we meet Du Bois’ challenge and make a sincere effort to include Day’s heroic and improbable story in our recognition of Black History Month.

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