

**Inclusive Historical Narratives:
Lessons from Mary Ritter Beard and Carter G. Woodson**

Sarah Bair
Dickinson College

This article examines the work of Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) and Mary Ritter Beard (1876-1958), two early 20th century historians and educators who dedicated their professional lives to the study and advancement of Black history and women's history respectively. In addition to their historical research and prolific publishing, Woodson and Beard devoted significant time and energy advocating an inclusive historical narrative in US schools and colleges. This work focuses on three of their primary goals: (1) challenging and correcting the accuracy of the historical record, (2) using history as a tool for mitigating racial and gender stereotypes, and (3) bringing women's history and Black history to the public. The article concludes with a discussion of the relevance and usefulness for contemporary educators of strategies used by Beard and Woodson as they sought to correct the historical record and develop curriculum that would engage all students.

Keywords: Black history, women's history, Mary Ritter Beard, Carter G. Woodson, historical role models, curriculum

Social studies teachers have long confronted the challenge of selecting and prioritizing the most important topics to explore in their history courses. Given the expansive nature of historical content and the political debates that often ensue when considering what material is of most value, this selection process has never been easy. Today's history teachers face additional competing demands as they strive to meet state and national standards, to foster critical thinking and communication skills embedded in the Common Core, and to examine history from multiple perspectives. Given the limited time available to teachers, the question of which people and events to include in the historical narrative becomes that much more fraught. Historically, teachers who sought to teach an inclusive history, one incorporating the perspectives and experiences of underrepresented groups, found few textbooks or other curriculum materials with substantive material (Anderson, 2013; Carlson, 2003; Schmidt, 2012; Zimmerman 2002). In recent decades, the number of notable White women and people of color in US history textbooks has increased, but there remains little evidence to suggest women's history or Black history has moved beyond the curricular margins (Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Sadker, D., Sadker, M. & Zittleman, 2009; Schmidt, 2012; Schocker & Woyshner, 2013). As educators consider ways to integrate fully the experiences of underrepresented groups, Blacks and White women in particular, it is instructive to examine the work of Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) and Mary Ritter Beard (1876-1958), two early 20th century historians and educators who dedicated their professional lives to the study and advancement of Black history and women's history respectively.

By foregrounding the work of Woodson and Beard when examining how social studies educators can embrace and implement an inclusive, relevant, and engaging U.S. history curriculum, I seek to achieve two goals. First, I want to illustrate the usefulness of their philosophies and strategies for classroom teachers. In recent decades, both Woodson and Beard

have been the focus of a number of scholarly works in the fields of history and education (Bair, 2006, 2012; Cott, 1991; Crocco, 1997; Dagbovie, 2004, 2007, 2010; Goggin, 1993; Keita 2000; Lane, 1977; Lebsock, 1989), but less attention has been given to their relevance for practitioners. The initiatives used by these educators to bring Black and women's history into schools, universities, and other public settings can inform the work of contemporary social studies educators who are striving to make curricula meaningful for all students. Second, I seek to show the importance of historical role models for students and teachers. When studying the historical record, students, as argued by Woodson and Beard, need to see people with whom they can identify and connect, in order to make sense of the world. Teachers, especially social studies teachers who fully recognize the value of history, can look to past educators, including Beard and Woodson, to inform, challenge, and inspire their own practices and to build on and deconstruct previous traditions.

Although there is no evidence to suggest Mary Beard (1876-1958) and Carter Woodson (1875-1950) worked collaboratively at any point during their long careers, there are striking parallels between their professional lives. Both college-educated historians (Beard at De Pauw University and Woodson at Berea College, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University), they became known, for their unrelenting commitments to the cause of a more complete and inclusive historical record. Woodson has been referred to as the "Father of Black History" and Beard as the "Mother of Women's History" in tribute to their longstanding work (Dagbovie, 2004; Lebsock, 1989). Although Woodson acquired more formal academic training and worked within more traditional, organizational structures (e.g. Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, the *Journal of Negro History*, and the *Negro History Bulletin*), both published prolifically and became well-known public figures within intellectual and political circles. They developed many of the same philosophical arguments to support their respective causes and employed similar strategies to achieve their ends.

Brief Biographical Sketches

Mary Ritter Beard was raised near Indianapolis, Indiana in a traditional mid-western home; she entered the co-educational DePauw University in 1894 with her parents' encouragement. At DePauw, she excelled in academics and leadership. She also met her future husband, the notable historian Charles Beard, with whom she eventually reared two children and co-authored seven books. After marrying in 1901, the Beards spent two years in Manchester England where Mary, under the influence of British socialists and suffragists such as Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, developed her interest in women's history and working-class issues. When she returned to the United States in 1902, Beard spent a brief period of time in graduate school at Columbia University, and soon immersed herself in the American suffrage movement aligned with Alice Paul's more radical wing of the cause (Cott, 1984; Zimmerman, 1974). Although fully committed to women's voting rights, Mary Ritter Beard differed from many of her suffrage colleagues by emphasizing the needs and interests of marginalized women, including women in poverty and the working-class, and, to a lesser extent, women of color. Experiences in the suffrage movement strengthened Beard's understanding of the power of activism and collaboration among women and fostered her appreciation for practical and varied approaches to social change. Beginning in the 1920s, however, she turned her attention more towards writing.

Although Mary Ritter Beard co-authored a civics textbook with her husband in 1914 and published her first book, *Woman's Work in Municipalities*, in 1915, she did not publish any books on women's history until the 1930s when she wrote *On Understanding Women* (1931) and edited *America Through Women's Eyes* (1933). She published her best-known work, *Women as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities*, in 1946. In addition, Beard worked on several education-related projects during this period to support the ideas suggested in her writing. She constructed a lengthy syllabus for a women's history course, tried to develop a central archive for source material on women, lobbied to change college curriculum, and led a research team tasked with revising the content of widely read encyclopedias.

Carter G. Woodson was reared in Huntington, West Virginia and graduated from the local Berea College in 1903 before embarking on a career in education. He began his work as a teacher in West Virginia, but also spent time early in his career teaching in the Philippines and studying in Europe. Like Beard, this time outside of the United States broadened his historical perspectives. After returning from Europe in 1907 and spending a year in graduate school at the University of Chicago, Woodson enrolled in a doctoral program in history and government at Harvard University. There, he studied under the direction of Albert Bushnell Hart. In 1909, Woodson joined the faculty at the M Street High School in Washington D.C., while still pursuing his doctorate and conducting research at the Library of Congress, and continued to work there until 1917 (Goggin, 1993).

While busy with his teaching responsibilities, Carter G. Woodson combined graduate studies and experiences at M Street to formulate many of his views on Black history and to begin his career as a writer and activist. In 1915, after publishing his first book, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War*, he and other Black scholars collaboratively established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). Under Carter G. Woodson's leadership, this organization, despite facing near constant financial challenges, sponsored several important initiatives, including the publication of two journals, *The Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin*. They also started an annual Negro History Week in February. From 1915 until his death in 1950, Woodson used an array of tools—writing, public speaking, organizing events, appealing to the popular press, and networking with other scholars and educators—to promote his cause.

Philosophies and Strategies

Although Mary Ritter Beard and Carter G. Woodson emphasized their own philosophies and influenced different groups of people, they based their arguments on similar philosophical premises, employed many of the same strategies to achieve their respective ends, and confronted parallel challenges. In discussing these two scholars' approaches, I focus on three of their primary goals: (1) challenging and correcting the accuracy of the historical record, (2) using history as a tool for mitigating racial and gender stereotypes, and (3) bringing women's history and Black history to the public.

Both scholars believed students in schools and colleges in the early 20th century learned inaccurate history due to a combination of omissions, distortions, and false claims. For Beard, the root of the problem rested with a tendency among historians and educators to make three critical errors when examining women's history. In her view, they defined history too narrowly, viewed women as passive victims rather than agents of change, and ignored the historical forces

of women before the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 (Beard, 1931, 1946). In defining the parameters of history, Beard rested firmly in the early 20th century New History camp. New Historians believed assumptions of traditional history had lost their relevance and called for a New History that would adequately address contemporary problems and explore a broader range of human experiences than those covered by traditional political and economic history (Robinson, 1965). Like other New Historians of her day, she stressed the importance of sociology, cultural anthropology, and other social sciences in the study of history and used these disciplines to examine all aspects of the civilizations and cultures she studied (Beard, 1931, 1946).

Mary Beard believed the roots of history would be deepened and enriched by integrating all aspects of life into the narrative. She considered the movement toward this integration, advocated by many New Historians after the turn of the century, to be “the most striking and significant tendency of contemporary social thought” (Beard, 1933, p. 1). As Margaret Crocco (1997) explained in her analysis of the Beards’ textbooks, Mary Beard used the notion of civilization as a tool for incorporating women’s history into the record. After making the case that history was incomplete if it did not integrate cultural processes, Beard argued women, historically, had been at the center of these processes and to overlook them would perpetuate flaws in historical scholarship. Beard, for example, broke historical tradition by placing the family at the center of civilization and women at the center of the family. The role of the family unit, she argued, should be central to any accurate historical narrative.

Although Mary Ritter Beard began her adult life believing, like many historians in 1900, the position of women in history was one of subordination and subjection, she came to reject this premise as inaccurate and illogical and to emphasize myriad examples of female agency in her work (Beard, 1915, 1931, 1946). Later feminists (Carroll, 1976; Lane, 1977; Lebsack, 1989; Salmon, 1979) criticized Beard for downplaying the very real oppression of women in many societies throughout history, but Beard argued the evidence showed a different and more complex picture. Whether discussing the impact of British common laws on women’s marriage and property rights or the economic structures of tribal societies, Beard used her scholarship to show how women often exerted far more power than most historians and feminists believed (Beard, 1946). Beard also criticized those historians who explored women’s agency, but who began the narrative with the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 and focused almost exclusively on the suffrage movement. In Beard’s view, this gave one the impression that women did nothing of substance before that time. In contrast to this approach, Beard argued students should study what she called the *Long History* of women across many cultures. By doing so they would reject the early 20th century notion women were just realizing their own potential for the first time (Beard, 1946).

Carter G. Woodson, like Mary Ritter Beard, argued omissions and distortions rendered inaccurate, the history being taught in both White and Black schools. For Woodson, the very survival of Black people depended on them learning their own history and being able to use the knowledge to refute traditionally held views and false assumptions. In a 1926 article for the *Journal of Negro History*, Woodson wrote, “If a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated” (Woodson, 1926, p. 239). Just as Beard believed women had long played active and important roles in history, but were merely neglected in the historical and scholarly records, so too did Woodson argue Blacks owned a rich and powerful history needing to be

accurately reconstructed and disseminated in schools. At the same time, in keeping with his scientific approach to history and his deep-seated commitment to rigorous evidence, Woodson emphasized that minor facts should not be exaggerated and that historians should focus on those areas with ample evidence showing the important role of Blacks in society (Woodson, 1926).

It was this belief, that the evidence only needed to be uncovered and shared, that led Beard and Woodson to devote significant time and energy to building Black history and women's history archives. In Woodson's fundraising efforts for the ASNLH, he often talked about the financial resources Whites put toward collecting archival materials and how his organization wanted the funding to do the same for Blacks. Over the course of his lifetime, Woodson helped to establish a relatively modest ASNLH collection at the Library of Congress, but he also encouraged state and local branches of the organization to build their own archival collections.

Mary Beard's commitment to women's archives as a crucial tool in correcting the historical record led to years of work. Her first attempt between 1935 and 1940 failed to establish the World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA); however, later established collections at Radcliffe and Smith College. The WCWA, first conceived by Hungarian-born feminist and pacifist, Rosika Schwimmer, but pushed more forcefully by Beard, adopted the slogan "No Documents – No History" and sought to establish a central repository for women's materials (Voss-Hubbard, 1995). In a September 14, 1935 letter to Rose Arnold Powell, a potential supporter, Beard explained her vision for the WCWA:

I therefore see two things in one through this archive project: the collection in one place of the data on women, including the rich personal material such as letters, diaries, memoranda; and the using of this material right at hand by people competent to use it, with the force of the Archive Center behind them (Cott, 1991, p. 135).

Although the effort to create the WCWA ultimately folded in September 1940 due to a variety of reasons, Beard's interest in creating women's archives continued, and she ultimately played a significant role in the establishment of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, which endures as one of the largest women's history archives in the country (Voss-Hubbard, 1995).

In addition to building archival collections in order to construct a more accurate and complete historical record, Mary Ritter Beard and Carter G. Woodson concerned themselves with the role of history in schools. They believed well-taught, Black history and women's history would mitigate destructive racial and gender stereotypes. Beard was primarily concerned with the female stereotype suggesting women were passive and largely uninterested in public life. In Beard's view, women accepted this conventional stereotype for themselves because erroneous, male-dominated history presented their foremothers in the same way (Beard, 1931, 1946). In an address to an AAUW Convention in 1937, Beard made her point by saying, "What University women think they are in the twentieth century must depend in large measure, and perhaps entirely, on what university women think women have been in previous centuries" (Beard, 1937, p. 1). In Beard's view, if schools educated women and men on the active roles women played over the long course of history, both sexes would be more inclined to question the stereotype of female passivity (Beard, 1937).

If early 20th century history texts portrayed White women as absent or passive, they, according to Woodson, portrayed Blacks as absent or inferior (Woodson, 1928). Woodson argued students reading these particular texts internalized a distorted view of history. Black

students learned nothing of their roots in African civilizations or of the powerful efforts by Blacks to resist slavery (Woodson, 1926, 1928). They read little about the myriad ways Blacks contributed to diverse American culture. These omissions strongly influenced both Black and White students by allowing a distorted view of reality to stand and by leaving racial stereotypes unchallenged. In Woodson's view, the traditional history curriculum taught a Black child to admire Whites while he had "the thought of the inferiority of the Negro drilled into him directly or indirectly in almost every social science subject which he studied" (Woodson, 1931, p. 126). Using Negro History Week and other initiatives to bring the voices of Black historians into schools, Woodson hoped to mitigate some of the damage being inflicted on students.

Ironically, Woodson believed the more time Black children spent in school, the more their positive racial identities would be undermined. According to Woodson, the situation did not improve when students had Black teachers. In most cases, Black teachers had been taught in ways that emphasized classical historical study, leaving them without expertise in Black History to refute claims of historical White superiority (Woodson, 1935). Carter G. Woodson and Mary Ritter Beard found it especially disappointing that Historically Black Colleges and Universities and women's colleges only perpetuated the myths and stereotypes. Woodson claimed because Blacks themselves had been "educated away from the race rather than to the race," they were inclined to "mis-educate" their students, leaving them with no knowledge of "what their people have done or what they have the capacity to do" (Woodson, 1931, pp. 124-125). This misguided approach, Woodson noted, also negatively affected White students who continued to devalue and discriminate against Blacks (Woodson, 1935).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Beard expressed a similar disappointment with the education of women, many of whom would become teachers. Mary Beard believed women often chose to compete in a man's world, rather than fashion a more democratic one of their own, because they did not know the history of women who had come before them. They lacked role models who could help them to construct an alternative vision of education because they had been taught women before the late 19th century had no educational opportunities. Beard went to great lengths to refute this point, stating in 1935, "What we now have is the instruction of young men and women in the history of men – of men's minds and manners. In not one college in this country—man's, woman's or co-educational—is there any comprehensive treatment of women's contributions to civilization and culture" (Cott, 1991, p. 15). During the same period, Beard used her women's history syllabus to claim, "The tissue of history consists of threads instinctively selected from men's activities in war, business, and politics, woven together according to a pattern of male prowess and power as conceived in the mind of man" (Beard, 1934, p. 7). Despite this skewed historical narrative, women who had recently learned to compete in these male-oriented institutions hesitated to criticize them. Beard found this especially frustrating in women graduating from all-female colleges. When it came to the study of history, Beard and Woodson both questioned whether this kind of education, which focused almost exclusively on the experience of White males, was worse than no education at all (Beard, 1934; Woodson, 1931).

In addition to their efforts to correct the historical record and to diminish racial and gender stereotyping, Carter G. Woodson and Mary Ritter Beard worked tirelessly to move their approaches to history beyond scholarly circles into the public domain. Believing that women's history could only be advanced through improvements in education at all levels with respect to women, Beard, in addition to her research and scholarly writing, embarked on a number of

projects to achieve this end. Along with her efforts to build women's archives that could serve as foundations for scholarship on women and encourage undergraduates to study women's history, Beard constructed a 52-page syllabus for the American Association of University Women (AAUW) that was intended for study groups with the AAUW and for college classes. She also worked with colleges, including Syracuse University where she spent a week in September of 1943, to integrate women's history into the school's curriculum.

While understanding the importance of academia in expanding curriculum, Mary Beard recognized most Americans did not go to college in the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, she also pursued other avenues to promote her cause. In addition to writing high school textbooks with her husband and speaking often to groups of public school teachers, Beard hoped to change the content of one of the most widely read, history-related publications in the U.S. at the time, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Lane, 1977). In early 1941, after being a critic of the publication for some time, Beard was asked by its editor, Walter Yust, to organize a research team to study the most recent edition of the encyclopedia and to make suggestions for ways that it might be improved with respect to women (Lane, 1977). Beard eagerly agreed and formed a research team that eventually issued a 42-page report crediting the publication for some improvements between 1926 and 1941, while criticizing its basic content in an acerbic and ironic tone (Beard, 1942). When Yust received the document, he encouraged Mary Beard to find women who could pursue some of the avenues suggested in the report and promised to improve future editions (Lane, 1977). Despite his promises, Yust never published any of the articles written by Beard and her colleagues.

Like Mary Ritter Beard, Carter G. Woodson used many strategies to bring a more inclusive history to the public. He too wrote textbooks designed for high school students and promoted the creation of archives. He gave speeches, sponsored conferences, raised money, mailed thousands of letters, and developed curriculum and classroom resources for teachers. All of these approaches sought to change the way everyday people understood their history, but Woodson's creation of Negro History Week in 1926 became his most influential initiative for bringing Black history to a broader spectrum of people.

When Woodson launched the first Negro History Week, he saw it as a way to build interest in Black history within schools and communities and to provide a practical structure which schools throughout the country could replicate (Bair, 2012). The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) developed and distributed useful, inexpensive materials and provided speakers for events. Once schools received resources from the ASNLH, Woodson encouraged teachers to use them throughout the year. He also lobbied communities to take advantage of books and materials provided by foundations. When the Carnegie Corporation's 1927 contribution to the New York Public Library allowed the library to acquire the A.A. Schomburg Collection of 4,000 books on African Americans, Woodson noted the public's access to the collection would be useful for Negro History Week celebrations and would generate interest in the Black history more broadly (Woodson, 1927).

Rather than seeing Negro History Week as an end in itself, Carter G. Woodson envisioned it as a culminating celebration of studies that had taken place throughout the year. He hoped a designated Negro History Week would no longer be necessary as more schools gave Black history a central place in their traditional history courses (Bair, 2012). In 1937, as part of his effort to promote the study of Black history throughout the school year, Woodson, launched the *Negro History Bulletin*, a practitioner-oriented journal geared towards the needs of teachers

and principals. The *Bulletin* contained content in the form of articles on Black history as well as teaching strategies and suggested resources. Woodson encouraged educators from around the country to submit their own resources and lesson ideas as a way to foster collaboration among practicing teachers and to give credit to exemplary programs. In addition to using the *Negro History Bulletin*, many high schools also adopted Woodson's textbook, *The Negro in Our History*. In 1929, Woodson reported the text was being used in at least some schools in 21 different states (Woodson, 1929). Woodson, like Beard, believed both public schools and institutions such as libraries and historical societies in the wider community had important roles to play in changing how the public viewed history.

Lessons for Today's Teachers

As Mary Ritter Beard and Carter G. Woodson understood, looking at history from multiple perspectives gives students a deeper and more accurate understanding of complex human events. With this in mind, there are many practical ways current social studies educators can apply Beards and Woodson's ideas into their own teaching. First, it is essential for teachers to find and employ classroom-friendly resources that will offer those perspectives. Organizations such as the National Women's History Project and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and the Schomburg Library, are dedicated to providing useful and accessible teaching materials, including visual aids such as poster sets, maps, and timelines. The Library of Congress's American Memory Collection contains online documents and photographs that can be analyzed by students as does the National Archives and Records Administration. Individual museums and national parks such as the Women's Rights Museum in Seneca Falls also provide online resources designed to be used by secondary students.

History is replete with examples of important individuals and groups that may be used to develop students' understandings of their deep historical roots. These examples also demonstrate to White girls and Black students there are people like them, to admire, to question, to critique, and to wonder about, in the historical record. When I was a young girl, I loved history and can vividly remember, as a fourth grader, being drawn to my first historical role models, most notably Paul Revere and Patrick Henry both of whom loomed large in my 9-year old mind. Other than an all-too-brief encounter with Joan of Arc in 10th grade, I did not find my first historical woman role model until almost 20 years later, despite the fact that I had graduated from college with a degree in history, when I encountered Alice Paul in a graduate-level history course. Another several years after that passed before I saw Mary Ritter Beard's name and began, for the first time, to consider all I had missed in my study of history.

Like many women and Blacks who begin to see the limits of their own educations, I felt disappointed. I was disappointed with my teachers and professors, but even more so, I was upset with myself for having taught more than a decade of high school history through such a limited lens. The truth of Mary Ritter Beard's words and the damage done by incomplete and biased educations in history weighed heavily on me, and, yet, at the same time I began to learn from her and began to see my own work as a teacher educator through her example. This is not to suggest that I agreed with Beard on every point or that I could not see any inconsistencies in her work. I did not need a perfect heroine; I needed a professional role model. As teachers, we can, indeed, look to history for role models who share aspects of our own identity and struggle, and, as teachers, we can help our students find their own historical role models and voices.

Finally, teachers can embrace the multi-pronged approaches Mary Beard and Carter Woodson used to champion their causes. Both of these educators had clear visions for what they hoped to see in history education and were often frustrated by the obstacles before them, but they always opted for incremental change over no change at all. Woodson, for example, would have preferred to see all school districts, regardless of racial composition, fully integrate Black history throughout their curricula, but he recognized *Negro History Week* could serve as an important bridge to his larger goals. Beard, likewise, would have preferred a restructuring of all history courses to include more social and women's history, but she was willing to take a single course on women's history and do anything she could to help it succeed. They also recognized they needed to push their causes on all fronts through networking, using the press, reaching out to teachers, giving speeches, and writing letters as well as through traditional scholarship.

For today's social studies educators who are busy with many professional demands and who are confronted with an overflowing curriculum and with high-stakes testing, the task of teaching an inclusive curriculum can seem overwhelming. Mary Ritter Beard and Carter G. Woodson remind us of why the struggle is important and why the stakes are high. No matter what our individual circumstances may be, we all have the power to start somewhere on the path toward a more inclusive curriculum.

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Author Bio

Sarah Bair is Associate Professor of Education at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, with research interests in women's history and history of education. She teaches undergraduate courses in social and historical foundations and secondary teaching methods. E-mail: bairs@dickinson.edu.