



7 fascinating facts about African American heritage in Southern West Virginia

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Baseball team composed of Coal Miners in Welch, McDowell County, WV

February is Black History Month, and southern West Virginia has an incredible African American history. Let's take a trip through time and celebrate our African American heritage.

1. Freedom and the coal boom

Did you know that McDowell County has a slave-free past? According to the [West Virginia Encyclopedia](#), after the Civil War, many African Americans were drawn to the area for this very reason. At the time, coal was a booming industry, and many African Americans worked as miners.

2. Carter G. Woodson

Carter G. Woodson is known as the "Father of Black History". Woodson started his career in the [coalfields of the New River Gorge](#). While working in the Kaymoor and Nuttallburg mines, he listened to the stories of fellow black miners and was inspired to document the contributions and struggles of African Americans. After saving up enough money to pay for his education, he became a teacher in the New River Gorge coal town of Winona.

3. **Kimball War Memorial Building**

The [Kimball War Memorial Building](#) was built in 1928 and was the first memorial built in the United States to honor African American World War I veterans. Today, it is the only such memorial remaining.

The Kimball War Memorial was the focal point of community life for decades, serving as a cultural and social center. Over time, the building was abandoned and fell victim to a fire in 1991. The building was placed on the National Historic Register in 1993; soon after, funds were raised to restore the memorial. Today, it serves as a museum and is open for special events and tours.

4. **Keystone, WV**

Keystone was one of the first African American established communities in southern West Virginia. The town elected West Virginia's first black mayor and established the first major minority newspaper: the "McDowell Times." M.T. Whittico, editor and publisher, attracted readers of all backgrounds. He actively contributed to politics, too. Whittico belonged to Keystone's city council and the Republican Party.

Tyler Hill was another prominent figure in Keystone. Though a lawyer by training, the Virginia native became part of Whittico's team. He owned part of the "Times" and helped promote readership. Hill was also industrious. Among other things, he became an assessor for Keystone and a politician.

5. **Political influence**

African Americans have a strong political history in McDowell County, too. According to the [West Virginia Division of Culture and History](#), the state House of Delegates "has almost always included a black McDowell County representative" since 1914.

When McDowell's delegate E. Howard Harper suddenly died in 1928, his wife, [Minnie Buckingham Harper](#), filled the role. In doing so, she became the nation's first female African American legislator. Her appointment highlighted the growing role of women in American politics and the importance of the African American political coalition in southern West Virginia.

6. **The first NAACP chapter in West Virginia**

[West Virginia's first chapter of the NAACP](#) was formed in 1921 in the town of Gary in McDowell County. There are 18 NAACP chapters in West Virginia to date.

7. **African American Heritage Tour**

This [self-guided driving tour and smartphone app](#) was developed by the New River Gorge National River and its partners as a way for visitors to uncover the history and tell the stories of the many black coal miners, railroad workers and other community members that helped shape the New River Gorge region. It spans across four counties in southern West Virginia: Summers, Raleigh, Fayette, and Nicholas.

Southern West Virginia's fascinating African American heritage is yours to discover!