FACT-CHECK TAKEAWAY

What Is Black History?

A compact evidence sheet for every historical claim in the session.
Use the sources below to verify, deepen or challenge the material.

All primary and secondary sources listed are publicly accessible.
Blue underlined text is a live hyperlink — click to open.

Black History Month · 2026

01

Mali and Timbuktu · 13th–16th centuries

CLAIM

Mali was a West African centre of power, trade and scholarship. Mansa Musa's 1324–25 pilgrimage made Mali famous across the Mediterranean. The 1375 Catalan Atlas pictured him holding gold. Timbuktu's manuscripts (from the 13th century) cover law, theology, commerce, science and literature.

PRIMARY & AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES

- UNESCO World Heritage Centre — Timbuktu
- UNESCO — Safeguarding Mali's manuscript collections
- BnF Catalan Atlas (Gallica — Mansa Musa image)
- TED-Ed — Mansa Musa (Jessica Smith)
- TED-Ed — The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu

Further reading: Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells* (Penguin, 2019)

HOW TO FACT-CHECK THIS

1. Open the UNESCO page and confirm Timbuktu's World Heritage status and manuscript description.
2. View the Catalan Atlas image on Gallica (BnF) — search "Catalan Atlas Mansa Musa".
3. Ask: Does the evidence show institutions and scholarship before the transatlantic slave trade?

02

John Blanke, Kongo–Portugal & Saint Maurice

CLAIM

A Black trumpeter (John Blanke) served at the Tudor court, appears on the 1511 Westminster Tournament Roll, and successfully petitioned Henry VIII for higher pay. Diplomatic and religious exchange existed between Kongo and Portugal from the late 15th century. A Black African image of Saint Maurice appeared in European Christian art by c.1250 (Magdeburg Cathedral).

JOHN BLANKE

National Archives — John Blanke

- Westminster Tournament Roll (College of Arms)
- Miranda Kaufmann, Black Tudors (2017)

KONGO + PORTUGAL

- Olivette Otele, African Europeans (2020)
- Letters of Afonso I of Kongo
- Portuguese–Kongo diplomatic records from 1480s

SAINT MAURICE

- Magdeburg Cathedral statue (c.1240–50)

Black Central Europe project

- Earliest major Black saint sculpture in Europe

Also useful: National Archives early Black presence resource — Early Black Presence

HOW TO FACT-CHECK THIS

1. National Archives page on John Blanke includes the wage records and petition.
2. Search “Westminster Tournament Roll John Blanke” for the visual evidence.
3. Magdeburg Cathedral Saint Maurice is confirmed in multiple art-history sources as c.1240–1250.
4. Central question: Did sustained Africa–Europe contact and Black presence in Britain predate modern immigration narratives?

03

Knowledge crossed the Atlantic · Onesimus & rice systems

CLAIM

Enslaved Africans carried specialised knowledge as well as labour. In Boston's 1721 smallpox outbreak, Onesimus described an African inoculation practice to Cotton Mather. West African expertise shaped wetland rice cultivation in parts of the Carolinas and Georgia.

ONESIMUS & INOCULATION

Harvard Library — Colonial North America collections

- Cotton Mather's own accounts of Onesimus (widely quoted in medical history)

National Library of Medicine — smallpox & inoculation history

- Boston 1721 outbreak: inoculated mortality far lower than general population

RICE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

- Judith A. Carney, Black Rice (Harvard University Press, 2001)
- West African tidal & mangrove rice systems documented in scholarship
- Planter advertisements seeking "Rice Coast" labour

Note: historians debate the exact scale and routes; the presence of specialised knowledge is not seriously disputed.

HOW TO FACT-CHECK THIS

1. Search "Onesimus Cotton Mather inoculation" — Mather's own words are widely quoted.
2. Note the careful wording: Onesimus communicated an existing African practice; he did not invent modern vaccination.
3. Carney's *Black Rice* is the foundational text; later scholarship debates scale/gender specifics but not the knowledge transfer.
4. Key test: Did the archive record ownership more carefully than expertise?

04

The Haitian Revolution · 1791–1804

CLAIM

The revolution destroyed slavery in the colony and created the first independent Black republic of the modern era. Freedom was not simply granted — enslaved people organised, fought and made it politically unavoidable.

1791	1803	1804
Mass revolt begins	French forces defeated (Vertières)	Haiti declares independence

SOURCES

Smithsonian NMAAHC — Toussaint Louverture
US Office of the Historian — Haitian Revolution 1791–1804
OER Project — The Haitian Revolution
• Library of Congress Haitian Revolution collections
• Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative (1789)
• Marlene L. Daut — scholarship on Haitian revolutionary history and literature

HOW TO FACT-CHECK THIS

1. US State Department Office of the Historian page is a concise official summary.
2. Smithsonian NMAAHC entry on Toussaint Louverture provides accessible primary-context material.
3. Compare treatment: Why are the American and French Revolutions routinely taught as universal history while Haiti is often a footnote?
4. Agency test: Does the evidence show collective organisation and military success by formerly enslaved people, or only external legislation?

05

Black Britain before Windrush

CLAIM

Evidence of African presence in Britain stretches back nearly two millennia. Windrush is a major modern chapter — it is not the beginning of Black British history.

Roman Britain Archaeological & epigraphic evidence of African presence (e.g. North African units, Ivory Bangle Lady).	**Tudor England** Black musicians, divers, servants and residents in records; John Blanke is the best-documented.
Port cities Black sailors and communities formed part of Britain's maritime history for centuries.	**Abolition era** Black writers and campaigners (including Equiano) shaped public debate.

KEY SOURCES

National Archives — Empire Windrush: Early Black Presence

- Hakim Adi, African and Caribbean People in Britain (Allen Lane, 2022)
- David Olusoga, Black and British (Pan Macmillan, 2016)

HOW TO FACT-CHECK THIS

The National Archives educational resource "Empire Windrush: Early Black Presence" explicitly states that Black people have lived in Britain for over two thousand years. Cross-check with Adi and Olusoga. Ask: If Black British history begins with immigration, what does that do to a child's sense of belonging?

06

Agency, abolition & why so much is unfamiliar

ON ABOLITION

Parliamentary abolition (Wilberforce and others) matters. A fuller answer also includes Black agency: resistance, revolt, testimony and organising that changed the political conditions in which abolition became possible. Freedom was continually forced onto the agenda, not simply given.

ON OMISSION

Curriculum choices, national narratives, colonial interests, archival practices and teaching traditions worked together over time. Empire claimed the authority to describe the people living under it. No single conspiracy — repeated selection creates a hierarchy of historical significance.

CORE FURTHER READING

David Olusoga — *Black and British*

Hakim Adi — *African and Caribbean People in Britain*

Olivette Otele — *African Europeans*

Miranda Kaufmann — *Black Tudors*

Toby Green — *A Fistful of Shells*

Judith A. Carney — *Black Rice*

FACT-CHECK PROMPT

Read Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) alongside any account that centres only parliamentary campaigners. Ask whether the evidence supports a story of freedom granted, or freedom continually forced onto the political agenda by Black resistance and testimony.

07

What can we do next?

From historical awareness to daily practice — five concrete starting points.

01 **WIDEN OUR KNOWLEDGE**

Choose one Black history subject beyond the familiar slavery-to-Windrush frame. Check it against the sources listed in this sheet. Start with Mali, John Blanke, Haiti or pre-Windrush Britain.

02 **KNOW THE CHILD'S HERITAGE**

Replace generic labels ("Black African") with specific family and cultural history wherever it can be recovered. Record names, places, migration stories, photographs and meaningful relationships.

03 **PRESERVE WHAT MAY BE LOST**

In life-story work and reviews, treat identity material with the same care given to risk information. Ask what a child will be able to recover later about who they are and where they belong.

04 **CHANGE WHAT CHILDREN ENCOUNTER**

Review one book, training resource, life-story tool or cultural plan with young people. Cultural work is more than flags, food and hair care — it includes truthful historical material.

05 **BUILD A LIVING CURRICULUM**

Co-design with young people. Update beyond October. Distinguish Black history from the distinct histories of other minoritised ethnic children — the principle transfers, the content must be specific.

ONE ACTION BEFORE THE END OF THIS MONTH

Choose one.

LEARN One Black history subject beyond the familiar curriculum — checked against credible sources.

PRESERVE One name, place, story, photograph or relationship that matters to a child's identity.

CHANGE PRACTICE Review one book, life-story resource, cultural plan or training session with young people.

Every child is building an answer to two questions: who am I, and where do I belong?
The history we make available becomes part of the material they have to answer with.