

**The Birthplace of American Democracy?  
The Historical Meaning of 1619 Jamestown and its Contemporary Relevance for  
2019 America**

In August 1619, two milestone events happened in Jamestown, the first permanent colony in English North America. The first event, a five-day session concluding on August 4, was the first meeting of a representative governing body in English North America. This governing assembly did not truly represent all the women and men in the colony (it only represented propertied white men). Yet, to millions of tourists and general observers of American history, Jamestown remains popularly known as the birthplace of American democracy. Four hundred years later, Americans, particularly Virginians, are commemorating 1619 as a Jamestown-centered origin story: the beginning of American democratic freedom. This familiar story obscures a lesser known, but equally significant event in late August 1619: the arrival of “20 and odd Negroes” to the colony. At the end of a harrowing forced migration across the sea, the arrival of these enslaved Africans began the entangled, intertwined histories of American freedom and American slavery, what the distinguished historian Edmund Morgan labeled the American paradox.<sup>1</sup> Over generations, the supposedly representative Virginia General Assembly reflected free, propertied white males protecting their expanding political and economic freedoms at the expense of enslaved Africans, Native Americans, white indentured laborers and convict laborers. From the pivotal month of August 1619, racial slavery reflected the limited, exclusionary nature of foundational ideals of freedom and democracy. The tragic circumstances of the 1619 Africans reveal that Jamestown was simultaneously on the periphery of pre-existing and expanding Atlantic World slavery and the foundational center of American racial slavery, which over 246 years, would result in four million enslaved people, making Civil War-era America the largest slave society in world history.

***African and Atlantic World Contexts***

The story of the 1619 Africans does not begin with Jamestown. Landing first at nearby Point Comfort (present-day Hampton, Virginia), the 1619 Africans, historians Linda Heywood and John Thornton assert, likely came from the state of Ndongo, territory that is now part of the modern country of Angola in West-Central Africa.<sup>2</sup> The

1619 Africans were part of the “Angolan wave” of enslaved Africans coming from West-Central Africa, the region from whence nearly 90% of them came in the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> They had already endured war-related capture, enslavement, and a mournful march of over 100 miles to a Portuguese slave ship in Luanda, West-Central Africa. They became part of the sordid history of the Atlantic Slave Trade, that resulted in the forced migration of approximately 12.5 million enslaved Africans to the Americas between 1502 and 1870. By 1619, the Portuguese had transported half a million captive African women, men and children in the Middle Passage from Africa to mostly Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas. English pirates and Dutch sugar planters were also involved in racial slavery. At the same time, there were about 250,000 enslaved “whites” in Russia and in the Mediterranean basin of southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, more than the total number of African-descended people in the Americas.<sup>4</sup>

The 1619 Africans were part of the 350 enslaved people from West-Central Africa eventually loaded onto the *Sao Joao Batista* in the port of Luanda. This Portuguese slaving ship was bound for the Spanish colony in Vera Cruz, Mexico. In Vera Cruz, they would have joined a growing slave population that included plantation workers and personal servants. During the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans were chained below the decks and suffered deep physical, mental and emotional traumas. Through endemic rape, crewmembers unleashed their savagery on women, girls (and some males). Like many slaving ships, the overcrowded *Sao Joao Batista* lacked sufficient supplies, food and drinking water. Captive Africans were forced to wallow in their own excrement and vomit; these squalid conditions meant that diseases like dysentery ran rampant. When food and water supplies ran low, or Africans fell sick, crewmembers threw them overboard, feeding them to the sharks that followed these ships. During this slavery at sea, approximately a third died during the Portuguese slaver’s voyage.

En route to Vera Cruz, the *Sao Joao Batista* stopped in Jamaica, selling 24 children perhaps in exchange for needed supplies. In the Bay of Campeche, just days from arrival in Veracruz, two English privateers, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer* attacked the *Sao Joao Batista*, hoping to find gold. Since the Dutch and the Spanish were

then at war, the *White Lion* carried a Dutch marque that sanctioned raids against Spanish ships. The ensuing battle left all three ships damaged, but when crewmen from the two privateers boarded the Portuguese ship, they found not gold, but hundreds of enslaved people. Along with tallow and wax, the two privateers eventually split a total of sixty captive Africans, who probably were amongst the youngest and healthiest on a ship of deeply traumatized people. Now subject to a new set of enslavers, the 1619 Africans now endured an almost two month inter-American journey to Point Comfort. In late August 1619, the *White Lion* arrived at Point Comfort, trading “20 and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Merchant bought for victualls.” The 1619 Africans foreshadowed Virginia’s slave society and hierarchical racial caste system firmly in place by 1700, but they were not the first captive blacks in the Western Hemisphere. The first enslaved Africans in the Western Hemisphere came from Sevilla, Spain to Hispaniola in 1505 and the first transatlantic slaving voyage directly from Africa to the Americas was in 1520. In 1526, rebellions by enslaved Africans in a fledgling Spanish settlement in present-day South Carolina caused it to collapse. In 1586, Francis Drake’s privateering fleet arrived to the doomed English settlement at Roanoke Island with 250 captive Africans as planned agricultural workers. But the settlement failed and Drake took these Africans, along with the settlers, back to England with him. In 1616, Bermuda became the first English colony to import enslaved Africans. But the 1619 Africans connected Jamestown to the rapidly expanding Atlantic World centered on the commercial wealth generated by enslaved African labor.

The devastating and traumatic experience of the 1619 Africans would be repeated by over 12 million enslaved Africans until the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Destined for Spanish America, the English-Dutch pirating venture against a Portuguese slaving ship that landed the 1619 Africans in Jamestown reflected shifting power dynamics between European powers. The English and Dutch (and soon the French) were no longer content to prey upon Spanish ships for silver and other riches gained from slavery. To these erstwhile pirates and aspirant colonists, enslaved Africans would be critical in generating untold wealth and building new slave societies in the Americas and the Caribbean. In this context, for the few hundred Africans that arrived in Virginia by 1650, enslavement was their presumed natural condition, as it was for blacks in the other

English Atlantic territories, particularly the influential sites of Bermuda and Barbados. Bermuda had a number of inauspicious “firsts” in English America: the first to import and enslave an African (1616), the first to have one hundred enslaved people (1619), and the first to pass a racially discriminatory law (1623).<sup>5</sup> In 1636, the Barbados governor and council decreed that arriving “Negroes and Indians” “should serve for life.” By 1650, Barbados had established a large-scale plantation economy based on enslaved African labor, a model soon reproduced in other English colonies like Virginia, South Carolina and Jamaica. English colonies adapted the Iberian model of racial slavery, the racial terminology of “Negro” that was synonymous with “slave,” and plantation agriculture first based on tobacco cultivation. With colonies controlled by political/economic elites and a rapidly expanding enslaved labor force producing profitable commercial crops like tobacco, sugar, rice and indigo, England became the world’s leading slave trading nation from 1650 to 1800 and the world’s leader in an emerging global capitalist economy.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Jamestown: Birthplace of American Slavery***

In late August 1619, Governor George Yeardley and the Colony Merchant Abraham Piersey journeyed to nearby Point Comfort to buy the “20 and odd Negroes” from the *White Lion*. They subsequently owned most enslaved people in these early years. Historian James Horn recently uncovered evidence that the *Treasurer* arrived four days later with about 30 Africans that had also been taken from the Portuguese slaver. They sold two or three Africans, including Angelo, the first documented African woman, before departing for Bermuda. There, the *Treasurer* sold about 29 captive Africans. In February 1620, the *Treasurer* sailed back to Virginia with a few enslaved Africans, perhaps originally from the *Sao Joao Batista*. The battered, rotted *Treasurer* promptly sank in a creek off the James River.<sup>7</sup> The *Treasurer* and the *White Lion* brought to Jamestown most, if not all, of the 32 Africans-17 women and 15 men- of 917 total people recorded in Virginia’s May 1620 census. They became known as “Angolans,” reflecting their regional African origins. These Angolans would have spoken a common language, Kimbundu, and since they came from states that had longstanding ties to Catholic Portugal, likely shared syncretic African/Catholic religious beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Were the 1619 Africans enslaved or free in the Jamestown colony? Some historians have argued that racial slavery was negligible before 1640, pointing to the fact that early colonial documents did not use the term “slave” and that some “Angolans” like Anthony and Mary Johnson, eventually bought their freedom and acquired extensive landholdings (The Johnson’s later named their farm “Angola). Yet, slavery was the reality for the 1619 Africans. Enslaved in Africa, during the long Middle Passage across land and sea, John Rolfe’s account of the “20 and odd Negroes” confirms that Jamestown settlers *bought* the Africans from the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*. Immediately after buying the Africans, Governor Yeardley immediately sent eight of the captives, five unnamed women and three unnamed men, to work on his Flowerdew Hundred plantation. In his 1627 will, Yeardley distinguished indentured servants from still-enslaved “negars” who became property of his estate ultimately inherited by his wife and children. The sanctity of private property was the political and economic bedrock of Jamestown-and private property extended to enslaved persons. Both Piersey and Yeardley died in 1627 still owning Africans they purchased from the *White Lion* eight years earlier. If they had regarded the 1619 Africans as indentured servants, their term of servitude would have already ended by 1627. In 1637, Yeardley’s son Argoll owned “Andolo” and “Maria,” two of the Africans sold from the *White Lion*. In 1653, Argoll sold two daughters of Andolo and Maria, twelve year old Denise and ten year old Doll, indicating that the children had inherited the enslaved status of their parents. Racial slavery had already become hereditary, long before the 1662 law that legally declared these realities.<sup>9</sup>

Early Court decisions and subsequent legislation also point to slavery. Legal scholar Paul Halliday has uncovered a 1625 Virginia General Court ruling that a black man named “Brase,” who was aboard an England-bound ship before bad weather forced it to land in Virginia, was to be the enslaved property of Governor Francis Wyatt.<sup>10</sup> In 1640, a Virginia statute addressing perceived security needs of the colony designated that “all persons except Negroes” should be provided with arms and ammunition. Another statute that year taxed colonists for African, but not white, women in their households. This distinction recognized the wealth generated by the officially sanctioned hard labor of African women. In 1640 too, three presumably indentured men, two white and one black, ran away from their indenture. Captured and subsequently punished for their

transgression, all three men received a sentence of forty lashes. But the two whites only received an additional year of indenture, while the black, John Punch received the sentence of *lifetime servitude*. A 1662 Virginia statute declared that the offspring of enslaved mothers inherited their mother's servitude, codifying hereditary racial slavery. In 1667, Virginia statutes also declared separately that Christian baptism did not alter slave status and that masters who killed their enslaved people during punishment could not be convicted of a crime; their property rights overrode any personhood rights of blacks.<sup>11</sup>

Colonists like Yeardley often created separate categories for Africans, providing additional circumstantial evidence of racial slavery. In the 1620 census, colonists listed the thirty-two “Negroes” as “not Christians” a separate labor category from servants. Probate inventories also illuminate contrasting descriptions of white and black laborers. Up to 1676, these inventories listed the remaining years of service-evidence of indenture-for more than 80% of white laborers. Conversely, these same inventories listed the years of remaining service for less than 1% of black laborers, indicating that the lifetime servitude of slavery made lists of remaining service very unnecessary. Unlike many indentured servants, there was rarely any recording of the age and arrival dates of Africans, indicated that lifetime servitude was the common expectation. Financial records also reveal that black laborers had much higher valuations than white laborers, likely reflecting the obvious benefits of permanent control of black labor over the temporary nature of white indenture. While the 1620s featured the wealthiest Virginia planters taking advantage of chance arrivals of occasional incoming ships selling enslaved Africans for needed supplies, beginning in the 1630s, they seemed to consciously seek purchasing enslaved people to enhance their wealth. By 1650, there were no more than 500 blacks in the colony, constituting about 3% of the total population. But the customary and legal foundations of racial slavery were already in place for the subsequent explosion in Virginian racial slavery that made it by 1690 the largest colonial slave society in English North America.<sup>12</sup>

In 1790, the first census of the new United States revealed that Virginia accounted for 40% of all enslaved people in the country. Paradoxically, Virginia slaveholders Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and James Madison were the most eloquent and

passionate advocates for foundational ideals of freedom, equality and democracy.

Virginia was the largest and most powerful slave colony and it would remain an equally large and powerful slave state. After the Louisiana Purchase (1803) doubled the size of the United States, (an event largely influenced by the Haitian Revolution), Jefferson declared these new territories to be an “Empire for Liberty.” Instead, these acquired lands became an Empire for Slavery as Virginia exported hundreds of thousands of enslaved blacks as part of a domestic Middle Passage to new Deep South states like Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. By 1860, the US, with four million enslaved blacks, was the largest slave society in world history.

### ***1619- 2019: Celebration, Anniversary or Remembrance?***

On July 30, 2019, exactly four hundred years after the embryonic democracy of the first Virginia General Assembly meeting, President Donald Trump became the first American sitting President to address a joint session of the Virginia General Assembly, the oldest legislative body in the Western Hemisphere. But, the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus boycotted the event. They protested the latest example of Trump’s racist, xenophobic attacks, this time against four American Congresswomen of color, demanding that they “go back to where they came from.” He continued his uninformed, racially-charged vitriol toward black Congressman Elijah Cummings and the city of Baltimore before and after his Jamestown remarks. The Virginia Legislative Black Caucus issued a statement that Trump did not represent American democratic values with his “degrading comments toward minority leaders...policies that harm marginalized communities...and racist and xenophobic rhetoric.” Outside the venue, several hundred people protested Trump’s presence as he extolled, like many across America this year, the “anniversary” of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans. The term “anniversary” has a celebratory connotation (i.e. wedding anniversary) that is wholly inappropriate. 2019 should be a *remembrance* of the tragedy, travails, and trauma that befell the 1619 captive Africans that became part of the Jamestown colony.

Trump’s cursory remarks about the “grave oppression” of African Americans also offers an opportunity to reflect somberly on the afterlives of 246 years of racial slavery. During the Civil War, Richmond, Virginia became the Capital of the

Confederacy, dedicated to defending slavery. During the nearly century-long Jim Crow era, Virginia erected more Confederate monuments than any other state and became the epicenter of the junk racial science known as eugenics. As President, the Virginian Woodrow Wilson resegregated the federal government and screened in the White House the racist film *Birth of A Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan. During the Civil Rights movement, Virginia became a leading site of “massive resistance,” closing public schools for several years instead of complying with Supreme Court desegregation decisions. Two years ago, neo-Nazi’s invaded Charlottesville, leading to white supremacist rioting and murder and President Trump’s claim that they were “very fine people On both sides.” This past February, we endured the spectacle of Virginia’s current governor, Ralph Northam, claiming incredulously that he did not appear in Ku Klux Klan robes and blackface on his medical school yearbook.

Despite Trump’s extolling of “four hundreds of glorious American democracy,” the hundreds of anti-Trump protestors at Jamestown Settlement noted his contemptuous disdain for democratic institutions and norms. Indeed, our American democracy in fact is far newer and far more fragile than we often imagine. Women, almost exclusively white, could not vote until 1920. Notwithstanding the brief moment of Reconstruction (when only black men, not black women, could vote), the 1965 Voting Rights Act first made voting and representative democracy available for the majority of black people. As Carol Anderson’s recent book, *One Person, No Vote* demonstrates, in the wake of the US Supreme Court’s recent gutting of the Voting Rights Act, intensifying partisan efforts to suppress black votes through gerrymandering, closing polling stations in predominantly black areas, purging voter rolls, Voter ID laws and foreign interference in our democratic processes, truly inclusive, participatory democracy remains fragile. 1619 Jamestown represented a limited, hierarchical, exclusionary democratic model that descendants of enslaved people, women, and a multitude of diverse peoples have made far more inclusive, expansive, and egalitarian. As we remember and honor the 1619 Africans today, we can also reflect on the enduring paradox (or perhaps the inevitable reciprocal entanglement) of racial progress and broad diversity reflected partially in the coalition that helped elect President Barack Obama and Trumpian racial backlash, birtherism and white supremacy. Reflecting on the intertwined historical trajectories that resulted in the

last two occupants of the White House, itself built by enslaved African-Americans, begs the interrelated questions: How far have we truly come in 400 years? And where are we going?

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Linda M. Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundations of the Americas, 1585-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, “Angola and the Seventeenth Century South Atlantic Slave Trade,” in David Richardson and Filipa Ribiero da Silva, eds. *Networks and Trans-Cultural Exchange: Slave Trading in the South Atlantic, 1590-1867* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 101-142.

<sup>4</sup> Philip D. Morgan, “Virginia Slavery in Atlantic Context, 1550-1650,” in Paul Musselwhite, Peter C. Mancall, and James Horn, eds. *Virginia 1619: Slavery and Freedom in the Making of English America* (Williamsburg, Va and Chapel Hill, NC, 2019), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Jarvis, “Bermuda and the Beginnings of Black Anglo-America” in *ibid*, 108-32.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that racial slavery was also taking root in New England. Providence Island was the site of the first slave society, with enslaved Africans being a slight majority in the late 1630s, and, in 1638, the site of both a law declaring “Negroes” to be “perpetual servants” and not coincidentally the first slave rebellion in English North America. In 1645, Massachusetts was the first colony to codify slavery in North America.

<sup>7</sup> James Horn, *1619: Jamestown and the Forging of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*.

<sup>9</sup> See Horn, *1619*, 85-117 and Morgan, “Virginia Slavery in Atlantic Context,” 85-107.

<sup>10</sup> Paul D. Halliday, Brase’s Case: Making Slave Law as Customary Law in Virginia’s General Court, 1619-1625,” in Musselwhite, Mancall, and Horn, *Virginia 1619*, 236-255.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Williamsburg, Va and Chapel Hill, N.C, 1996), 115-133; Anthony Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Williamsburg, Va and Chapel Hill, NC, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> John C. Coombes, “Beyond the ‘Origins Debate’: Rethinking the Rise of Virginia Slavery,” in Douglas Bradburn and John C. Coombes, *Early Modern Virginia: Reconsidering the Old Dominion* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011), 255-263.