

The Historical Paradox of Racial Progress in America

2019 is a significant year in American history, because it recognizes the 400 years that have passed since the arrival of the first Africans in English North America. It is the remembrance of the tragedy, travails and trauma that befell these 1619 captive Africans who were forcibly landed at Old Point Comfort, which is now Hampton, Virginia. Understanding the legacy of the African arrival is crucial to comprehending our trajectory as a country, and the critical role of cultural diversity in American life.

In August 1619, two milestone events occurred in Jamestown, Virginia that established it as not only the birthplace of democracy and freedom, but paradoxically, the origin of American slavery and racism.

The first event, concluding on August 4, was the first meeting of a representative governing body in English North America. However, it is important to remember that this governing assembly did not truly represent all the women and men in the colony, because it only represented white men who owned property. 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. These enslaved Africans would become the founding mothers and fathers of the African Diaspora in English North America and were part of the foundational generation of the people now known as African Americans.

The end of this harrowing forced migration across the sea also marked the beginning of 246 years of racial slavery. Over generations following, the supposedly representative Virginia General Assembly reflected free, landowning white men by protecting their expanding political and economic freedoms at the expense of enslaved Africans, Native Americans, women, white indentured laborers, and convict laborers. From that pivotal month of August 1619, racial slavery reflected the limited, exclusionary nature of the foundational ideals of freedom and democracy.

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. 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. In the Gulf of Mexico, just days from arrival in Veracruz, two English privateers, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer* attacked the *Sao Joao Batista*, eventually taking about sixty total captive Africans from the Portuguese slaver. In late August 1619, the *White Lion* landed at Point Comfort and sold the “20 and odd Negroes” to Virginia Governor George Yeardley and the Colony Merchant Abraham Piersey. The *Treasurer* arrived four days later and sold two or three Africans, including Angelo, the first documented African woman, before departing for Bermuda, where it sold about 29 captive Africans. Jamestown now became part of a rapidly expanding Atlantic World centered on the commercial wealth generated by enslaved African labor. Over the course of the 17th century, the English went beyond raiding slave ships destined for Spanish colonies to establishing their own colonies and generate their own slave-produced wealth in the Western Hemisphere. To these erstwhile pirates and aspirant colonists, enslaved Africans would be critical in generating untold wealth and building new

societies. In this context, for the few hundred Africans that arrived in Virginia by 1650, enslavement was their presumed natural condition.

At the end of the 17th century, Virginia had codified a hierarchical racial caste system anchored by racial slavery. Jamestown represented a foundational North American site for developing ideas of white supremacy and black inferiority that continue to flourish in contemporary American society. Several examples include the following: census records identified white settlers by first and last name while blacks were either not identified at all or only referenced by a first name; a 1625 Virginia General Court ruling declared a black man named “Brase,” aboard an England-bound ship before bad weather forced it to land in Virginia, to be the enslaved property of Governor Francis Wyatt. In his 1627 will, former Governor George Yeardley included “negars” as part of his estate to be passed on to his wife and children. A 1640 statute taxed colonists for African, but not white, women in their households; another 1640 statute designated that “all persons except Negroes” should be provided with arms and ammunition, a 1662 Virginia statute declared that the offspring of enslaved mothers inherited their mother’s servitude, codifying hereditary racial slavery; and from John Rolfe’s initial description of the 1619 Africans, racial designations like “Negro” and “Negars” were widely used.

By the 18th century, Virginia was the largest and most powerful North American slave colony. After the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States, Virginia exported hundreds of thousands of enslaved blacks to new Deep South states like Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. During the Civil War, Richmond became the Capital of the Confederacy, dedicated to defending the largest slave society in world history, with four million enslaved blacks. Virginia also became a leading site of “massive resistance” to the Civil Rights movement by closing public schools for several years instead of complying with Supreme Court desegregation decisions. Even today, legacies of racism remain in Virginia, from the 2017 white nationalist rioting and murder in Charlottesville, to Ku Klux Klan and blackface images on Governor Northam’s medical school yearbook page.

The two milestone events in August 1619, the first representative governing assembly and the arrival of captive Africans represent the beginning of a paradox of democratic freedom for some, and exclusion from these same democratic freedoms for others. As we remember and honor the 1619 Africans in 2019, we should also reflect on the enduring non-linear nature of racial progress in American society.

In this contentious political climate, as we remember and honor the 1619 Africans in 2019, we can also reflect on the enduring paradox of racial progress and racial backlash in American society: How far have we truly come in 400 years? Virginia’s 2019 Commemoration, American Evolution, invites you to be part of the conversation solution by engaging in the more than 20 [upcoming events](#) that will shed light on an inclusive, but often painful history of Virginia since 1619. I invite you to join me in this conversation and help pave the way for a more honest and authentic telling of the past that can forge a path toward a more inclusive future for Virginia and America.

Robert Trent Vinson is the Frances L. and Edwin L. Cummings Professor of History & Africana Studies at William & Mary. He is also the lead organizer of the 10th Biennial Conference of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD), held November 5-9, 2019 at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.