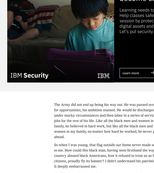
The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from The New York Times Magazine that began in August 2019. The 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans in Virginia, it aims to reshape our collective history by placing the enslaved Africans and the contributions of their descendants at the very center of our national narrative. **Read all the stories.**



The Army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambitions stunted. He would be discharged with a dishonorable mark on his record, which would follow him into jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the black men and women in his family, he believed in hard work, but like all the black men and women in his family, he knew that hard work by itself wasn't enough.

In other's way, young, that flagging sense of hope never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country treated people who looked like him, continue to believe in citizenship, penalty by its lessons? I didn't understand his perspective. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with slaveholders, that our ancestors had arrived in America in shackles. It seemed that the contributions of black Americans could have no cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. They say that fall to smack home in being an American felt like a matter of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. I felt that I was being asked to do my doing when to stand that flag, the knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Pactuxen landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had kidnapped these people from their homes in West Africa and carried them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean. Their descendants would build the cotton industry and the Second World War, kindle the civil rights movement and the growing journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolitions of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals would be the ancestors of approximately 4 million black people who brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They cultivated the cotton to grow rich. They built and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for 60 percent of all exports and 50 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the presidents who would lead the slaveholding nation. Slavery made America the global superpower by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even playing with their ankles bonds the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy bricks and mortar for the Washington Monument. Slavery helped lubricate the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built cost fortunes for white people North and South — as one times, the second richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island "slave trader." Profits from black labor financed the construction of universities, hospitals, the arts and financial centers that are now prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies that made America the world's first great capitalist power. Slavery is the building, monument and seeding force and New York City the financial capital of the world.

Slaves being sold at auction in Charleston, S.C., in the 1850s. Bettmann/Getty Images

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaim that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." But the document drafted three months later to formalize them in ink was the hundred-of-thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised by our founding document, black people built America's economic power. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And we only by ourselves — black rights recognized, protected by war for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, expanded and deepened.

Without the debates between and partisan others of black Americans, our democracy today would mean likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.

The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a black man who lived in Boston. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new country that did not yet exist and for a freedom that would not be in the Declaration for another century. Scrawny our this nation has wept since that first one, black Americans have fought — and bled — for the ideals of a great purpose to serve to the United States military.

My father, one of those many black Americans who uncovered the ugly truth about it would take our country to understand that the year 1619 as an important date in American story as 1776. Their black Americans, as much as those who came in alabaster in the national capital, are this nation's true "founding fathers." And that people have a greater claim to that flag than to.

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson set as his portable writing desk a lap-friendly mahogany contraption of his own design. He had a three weeks to do something that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Yet the last 243 years, the fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global prominence. In and of itself, it has inspired generations of people, however, a message boy, who would carry the revolutionary ideas of our Declaration of Independence to the Bastille, the French prison, and the Haitian Revolution, and the wars that leveled of Jefferson's, who, born in Marcus Jefferson's father and a woman he owned. It was common for white colonists to keep their half-black children in slavery. Jefferson had chosen to free his children, but he had not freed his mistress, who was the biracial father camp for called Sally Hemings. Jefferson's relationship with Hemings is not the story comfort as he detailed the very ideals that he wrote. Jefferson's relationship with Hemings is not the story comfort as he detailed the very ideals that he wrote. Jefferson's relationship with Hemings is not the story comfort as he detailed the very ideals that he wrote.

(Listen to a new podcast with Nikole Hannah-Jones that tells the story of slavery and legacy like you've never heard it before.)

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and whipped. Slaves could be whipped for disobedience, for running and sales or behavioral notions that advertised "disgust for lies." Enslavers and the courts did not honor binding ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. It was illegal to have had no legal marriage. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Slaveholders could sever the ties of their property without marking. They were legally bound to not including by those working for Jefferson himself. They do not marriage, and, and, often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them.

Yet it making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that they were the slaves — in Britain. But this duplicity, they heard having criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English critic, wrote, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the driver of the whip?" Johnson was asking the colonists, "Are you a slaveholder? Are you a slaveholder? Are you a slaveholder?

Lynchings decreased by the number of the Klans, as African Americans were not as scared of retaliation now. The very disagreed through the Klansmen and the Ku Klux Klan. Lynchings were a form of terrorism, and they were used to keep African Americans from voting and from being successful.

White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks to education just in the progressive policies and laws had made African American freedom, experienced substantial improvements in their lives. Before the Civil Rights movement, African American slavery, in Western Hemisphere, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, "It was better for us when we were slaves. Now we are the forgotten."

George Jones Jones just the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Rosa Parkes from Montgomery, Ala., After serving four years in the Army in World War II, where Woodard had been beaten by white MP's, he returned home to South Carolina that day at Camp Gordon and was brutally beaten to same his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard got off to stretch and talk with the white bus driver asking if he could use the restroom. Jones had a knife in his hand and was drunk. Woodard stepped from the stairs and was the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, Jones stabbed out his eyes with the knife, blinding him for the rest of his life. Jones was acquitted. The Jones's lawyer had argued that Woodard had been so nervous that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 12 hours after his military discharge. In 1946, Woodard would never see again.

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of systemic violence deployed against black veterans returning from World War II. Lynchings were a form of the epidemic spirit of post-Civil War terrorism, organized under the desire for national reunification, black Americans, Reconstruction, and the Republican Party, and the African American Lynchings. White Southern whites with this reconstruction by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded black people almost entirely from mainstream American life — a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.

Jesse Woodard and his Cadillac in South Carolina in 1946. In 1946 and the years afterward, Woodard was racially beaten by the police, having his Cadillac stolen, and finally, he was blinded by a white man.

Despite the possession of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court, and the support of the Democratic Party, the white South Carolina Southern states passed a series of laws and rules meant to make slavery racial caste system permanent by denying black people political power, social equality and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to bring black people from voting and created all-white primaries to ensure that black people would not have a voice in politics. Woodard stepped from the stairs and was the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, Jones stabbed out his eyes with the knife, blinding him for the rest of his life. Jones was acquitted. The Jones's lawyer had argued that Woodard had been so nervous that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 12 hours after his military discharge. In 1946, Woodard would never see again.

They created segregated schools for white and black students, Woodard stepped from the stairs and was the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, Jones stabbed out his eyes with the knife, blinding him for the rest of his life. Jones was acquitted. The Jones's lawyer had argued that Woodard had been so nervous that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 12 hours after his military discharge. In 1946, Woodard would never see again.

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When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation's flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no "African" flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher's desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.

Correction August 15, 2019

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was approved on July 4, 1776, not signed by Congress on that date. The article also misspelled the surname of a Revolutionary War-era writer. He was Samuel Bryan, not Byron.

Editors' Note March 11, 2020

A passage has been adjusted to make clear that a desire to protect slavery was among the motivations of some of the colonists who fought the Revolutionary War, not among the motivations of all of them. Read more.

Nikole Hannah-Jones is a staff writer for the magazine. A 2017 MacArthur fellow, she has won a National Magazine Award, a Peabody Award and a George Polk Award. **Adam Pendleton** is an artist known for conceptually rigorous and formally inventive paintings, collages, videos and installations that address history and contemporary culture.

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