
1620

*A Critical Response
to the 1619 Project*

PETER W. WOOD



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PRELIMINARIES

WHAT IS THE 1619 PROJECT?

ON SUNDAY, August 18, 2019, the *New York Times* published a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* announcing “The 1619 Project.” Along with the 100-page magazine, the *New York Times* released a sixteen-page newsprint section under the same title and headlined “We’ve Got to Tell the Unvarnished Truth,” quoting the late historian John Hope Franklin.

On the opening page of the magazine, Jake Silverstein, the *Times*’ editor in chief, stated the project’s aim:

The goal of The 1619 Project, a major initiative from The New York Times that this issue of the magazine inaugurates, is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.¹

Reframing the country’s history is an extraordinarily ambitious goal, and not something one would ordinarily expect to come from a newspaper. The *Times*, however, is

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not the least bit circumspect in announcing it. The 1619 Project is, in other words, an all-out effort to replace traditional conceptions of American history with a history refracted through the lens of black identity politics.

This approach goes far beyond the case for teaching African American Studies in colleges or making sure that black history is integrated in school curricula. Instead of asserting the need to *add* to traditional American history a fuller account of the black experience, the 1619 Project calls for *replacing* that traditional account with one that makes the black experience primary – and not just for black Americans, but for all Americans.

This short book responds to the 1619 Project, but it is not a point-by-point examination of everything the contributors to the 1619 Project first wrote or of what they and others have said since. I aim instead to take the reader on a hike through the main themes of the 1619 Project, pointing out the dizzying vistas, treacherous paths, poisonous snakes, sudden drop-offs, and hungry grizzly bears. The central tenets of the 1619 Project are that Americans have grossly misunderstood the origins and nature of American society, and that slavery is the pivotal institution in American history.

The contributors to the 1619 Project are, of course, more specific. Their claims include the idea that America began with the arrival of slaves in Virginia in August 1619; that the primary purpose of the colonists who declared independence from Britain in 1776 was to preserve American slavery from the danger of Britain's outlawing it; that the Southern plantation system of growing cotton with slave labor is the foundation of modern American capitalism; and that Lincoln was a racist who had no interest in conferring real citizenship on those who were enslaved.

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The project's contributors undoubtedly knew these to be provocative claims. In their statements and behavior in the months that followed the release of the special issue of the magazine, some of them relished both the adulation they received from supporters and the dismay of critics, who proved ineffectual in stemming public attention to the *Times*' splash.

It quickly became clear that the 1619 Project was a lot more than the initial publication of the magazine and the newspaper supplement. It was and still is a "project" in the fullest sense of the term. The Pulitzer Center partnered with the *Times* to plant a 1619 Project curriculum in the nation's schools. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the architect of the 1619 Project and author of its lead essay, went on a nationwide speaking tour and was met by friendly audiences. The *Times* not only heavily advertised the project, it seeded themes from the project in hundreds of news stories and columns. It added a podcast devoted to the project, and it used its weekly online newsletter, "Race/Related," to stoke the fire. Given the *Times*' status as the nation's "newspaper of record" and the lodestar for other news organizations, 1619 Project themes and conceits began to appear everywhere in the nation's press, with or without explicit mention of the project itself.

The larger aim of the 1619 Project is to change America's understanding of itself. Whether it will ultimately succeed in doing so remains to be seen, but it certainly has already succeeded in shaping how Americans now argue about key aspects of our history. The 1619 Project aligns with the views of those on the progressive left who hate America and would like to transform it radically into a different kind of nation. Such a transformation would be a terrible mistake: it would endanger our hard-won liberty, our self-government, and our virtues as a

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people. Little is to be gained, however, by progressives and conservatives lobbing boulder-sized principles back and forth across the line that divides them.

Instead, this book explores the 1619 Project as a cultural phenomenon: a testimony to the beliefs and ambitions of one faction. That I do not share these beliefs and ambitions gives me the freedom to consider them from angles that the project's adherents might not entertain. That freedom also allows me to examine criticisms of the 1619 Project coming from many whose premises I don't share: hard-core Marxists, liberal statist, hard-core free-market advocates, and Southern apologists, among others. My own views, which I have presented in other books and articles, are of a mildly conservative and traditionalist sort. I regard the primary values of our nation as stated clearly in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, namely, "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. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

On matters of race, I uphold the principle that our Constitution and our laws should be colorblind, and that our society should strive for the common good, which is best achieved by treating one another as individuals, not as representatives of identity groups. We do, however, have the freedom to form our own communities and to enjoy shared cultural affinities. "Race" in that sense is not likely to disappear anytime soon in a general cultural amalgamation. People will separate and divide themselves as often as people will "appropriate" from the cultural traditions of others. There is nothing sinister in either impulse.

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But this leaves open the question of how racist and how oppressive American society really is. I believe there is abundant exaggeration on both left and right, much of it driven by politics. Some exaggerate the degree to which racism pervades American society. Some exaggerate the degree to which racism is a thing of the past that contemporary America has moved beyond. It is very difficult for most Americans to avoid exaggerating in one direction or the other. If you have experienced overt racism or seen it up close, it is likely to loom very large in your assessment of the nation. If you have not experienced racism first-hand, it is likely to appear to you to be merely a talking point for those who cling to a particular narrative, when they could just as easily enjoy the full freedoms that the country offers. Who is right?

The 1619 Project offers the fullest and most vigorous exposition of the view that America is a racist, oppressive country. Fringe groups of black nationalists take an even grimmer view, but the 1619 Project has taken ideas that a few years ago were exclusively fringe a good way into the realm of mainstream opinion. The idea, for example, that the American Revolution was a pro-slavery event once circulated only among conspiracy-minded activists with comic-book-style theories of history. The 1619 Project has brought it from the playground into the classroom, to the consternation of serious historians everywhere.

Slavery, of course, was not an American invention, or a European one. It has existed in human societies for thousands of years. In north and east Africa, slave capture and trading were pursued on an enormous scale by Arabs. When Europeans encountered native kingdoms on Africa's Atlantic coast in the fifteenth century, they discovered slavery as a deeply embedded practice. That

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the Portuguese and the Spanish fostered this practice by creating a market for African slaves in the New World is among the great tragedies of human history. Other European powers eventually joined in perpetuating that tragedy.

By comparison with the Caribbean and South American colonies, the English colonies that would one day become the United States were lightly touched by the slave trade, especially during their first hundred years. The 1619 Project argues to the contrary that the enslavement of Africans was central to the formation of American social order and the American economy as early as the seventeenth century.

The usual way for disputes about history to be resolved is for historians to present their best arguments, and their sources, in journal articles; each side can then examine the evidence for themselves and hammer out the truth. The 1619 Project evades this kind of transparency. The lead author, Nikole Hannah-Jones, who makes some of the most audacious claims, cites no sources at all: the project as presented in the magazine contains no footnotes, bibliography, or other scholarly footholds.

An ordinary reader would not expect such things in a Sunday newspaper, but the 1619 Project is not an ordinary piece of newspaper journalism. It is an attempt to wrest control of the grand narrative of American history. That really isn't the proper role for a newspaper, which should report the news rather than attempt to create it. The *Times* stumbled badly by presenting unsourced and unsupported assertions as the writing of history. Much of the controversy that followed consisted of historians' challenging the claims and the *Times*' scrambling to find some plausible substantiating evidence.

I chose the title *1620* mainly as a riposte to the claim

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that the arrival of slaves in Virginia was the real founding of America. In November 1620, the passengers on the *Mayflower* drew up an agreement on how they would conduct their public affairs when they disembarked. That document, the Mayflower Compact, I argue – as have many others – pointed the way toward America's self-government. It is the beginning of ordered liberty in the New World. That is the vantage point from which I survey the 1619 Project. America was never a "slavocracy." It was and is humanity's great attempt to create a society based on principles of freedom and equality.

This book, I repeat, does not respond to every component of the 1619 Project, but only to the pieces that I judge to be central or most representative of the whole. The hike on which I lead you will not cover every inch of the Grand Tetons, just the best and the scariest parts. The reader may find it helpful, however, to have a map of the project in its entirety.

The August 18 *New York Times Magazine* presented thirty-six separately bylined contributions. Ten of these are articles of several pages, and one is a multipage photo-essay. Eight are brief articles or sidebars. Seventeen are brief literary works commissioned from black writers by the *Times* for this project. Not including the photos in the photo-essay, there are forty stand-alone photographs or artworks of some sort. There is also the cover photo and text, a table of contents, three pages of photos and notes on the contributors, and a pertinent announcement from the Pulitzer Center on the inside back cover.

The longer articles have peculiar, sentence-like titles. They are as follows (the online version of the 1619 Project emends the titles as noted and also presents the articles in a different order):

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1. Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Our democracy's founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all." (As emended, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.")
2. Matthew Desmond, "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation."
3. Jeneen Interlandi, "Why doesn't the United States have universal health care? The answer begins with policies enacted after the Civil War." (The second part of the title was emended as "The answer has everything to do with race.")
4. Kevin M. Kruse, "A traffic jam in Atlanta would seem to have nothing to do with slavery. But look closer." ("What does a traffic jam in Atlanta have to do with segregation? Quite a lot.")
5. Jamelle Bouie, "American democracy has never shed an undemocratic assumption present at its founding: that some people are inherently entitled to more power than others." ("America holds onto an undemocratic assumption from its founding: that some people deserve more power than others.")
6. Linda Villarosa, "Myths about physical racial differences were used to justify slavery – and are still believed by doctors today."
7. Wesley Morris, "For centuries, black music, forged in bondage, has been the sound of complete artistic freedom. No wonder everybody is always stealing it."

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8. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, "The sugar that saturates the American diet has a barbaric history as the 'white gold' that fueled slavery."
9. Bryan Stevenson, "Slavery gave America a fear of black people and a taste for violent punishment. Both still define our criminal-justice system."
10. Trymaine Lee, "A vast wealth gap, driven by segregation, redlining, evictions and exclusion, separates black and white America."

The multipage photo-essay is by Djeneba Aduayom, with accompanying text by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Wadzanai Mhute: "Their ancestors were enslaved by law. Today, they are graduates of the nation's preeminent historically black law school."

These are the short articles (titles as emended in the online version as noted):

1. Jake Silverstein (*Times Magazine* editor in chief), "1619." ("Why We Published the 1619 Project.")
2. Tiya Miles, "Chained Migration: How Slavery Made Its Way West." ("How Slavery Made Its Way West.")
3. Mehrsa Baradaran, "Mortgaging the Future: The North-South rift led to a piecemeal system of bank regulation – with dangerous consequences." ("The Limits of Banking Regulation.")
4. Mehrsa Baradaran, "Good as Gold: In Lincoln's wartime 'greenbacks,' a preview of the 20th-century rise of fiat currency." ("Fiat Currency and the Civil War.")
5. Mehrsa Baradaran, "Fabric of Modernity: How Southern cotton became the cornerstone of a new

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global commodities trade.” (“Cotton and the Global Market.”)

6. Tiya Miles, “Municipal Bonds: How Slavery Built Wall Street.” (“How Slavery Made Wall Street.”)
7. Tiya Miles, “Pecan Pioneer: The Enslaved Man Who Cultivated the South’s Favorite Nut.” (“The Enslaved Pecan Pioneer.”)
8. Anne C. Bailey, text, with photograph by Dannielle Bowman, “Shadow of the Past.”

The literary works, mostly untitled, are by the following writers:

1. Clint Smith (a poem about the arrival of slaves in Virginia in 1619)
2. Yusef Komunyakaa (a poem about the killing of Crispus Attucks, 1770)
3. Eve L. Ewing (a poem about Phillis Wheatley’s poems published in 1773)
4. Reginald Dwayne Betts (a graphic about the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793)
5. Barry Jenkins (a prose account of a slave rebellion in Virginia in 1800)
6. Jesmyn Ward (a prose account of the end of importing slaves in 1808)
7. Tyehimba Jess (a poem about the American attack on Negro Fort in 1816)
8. Darryl Pinckney (a prose account of the Emancipation Proclamation, 1863)

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9. ZZ Packer (a prose account of a mass killing in Louisiana in 1866)
10. Yaa Gyasi (a prose account of the Tuskegee Study of untreated syphilis, 1932)
11. Jacqueline Woodson (a prose account of the beating of Isaac Woodward, 1946)
12. Rita Dove (a poem about the Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, 1963)
13. Camille T. Dungy (a poem also about the Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16th Street Church)
14. Joshua Bennett (a poem about the founding of the Black Panthers, 1966)
15. Lynn Nottage (a prose account of the first rap song, “Rapper’s Delight,” 1979)
16. Kiese Laymon (a prose account of Jesse Jackson calling for a Rainbow Coalition, 1984)
17. Clint Smith (a poem about Hurricane Katrina, 2005)

The *Times*’ sixteen-page newspaper supplement offers only one substantial essay: Nikita Stewart, “Why Can’t We Teach This?” (It is also published in the online version of the magazine as “‘We are committing educational malpractice’: Why slavery is mistaught – and worse – in American schools,” and headlined on the *Times*’ website as “Why Can’t We Teach Slavery Right in American Schools?”)

The rest of the supplement consists of full- and half-page graphics and photographs “curated by Mary Elliott,” with text by Mary Elliott and Jazmine Hughes.

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These include images of “an iron ballast block” recovered from a slave ship that sank off the coast of Cape Town in 1794 and of iron shackles for a child (from “before 1860”). Three pages feature short articles, numbered 1 to 3. No. 1 is titled “Slavery, Power and the Human Cost, 1455–1775.” No. 2 is titled “The Limits of Freedom, 1776–1808.” No. 3 is titled “A Slave Nation Fights for Freedom, 1809–1865.”

This material all fits thematically with the 1619 Project, though how exactly it is intended to advance the cause is unclear. Reading the supplement is like walking through a not-so-well-organized museum exhibit that follows rough chronology, and presents some striking images, but is overpowered by one screaming headline after another.

The 1619 Project plainly does not end with these two publications on August 18, 2019. Many more statements followed and are continuing to be issued. But the magazine, and to a lesser extent the newspaper supplement, define the scope of the project and embody its spirit.

It bears noting that the contributors to the 1619 Project are well educated and well placed. Their views may in a general sense be understood as representative of elite education in the United States. Of the fourteen main contributors and the suppliers of sidebars, seven are professional journalists, six of whom work for the *New York Times*. Six are academics, five of whom are historians. One, Bryan Stevenson, is a practicing attorney and noted author.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, journalist (*Times*). BA, University of Notre Dame; MA (journalism), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Matthew Desmond, sociologist (Princeton). BA, Ari-

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zona State University; PhD (sociology), University of Wisconsin.

Jeneen Interlandi, editor (*Times*). BA (biology), Rutgers University; MA and MS (journalism), Columbia University.

Kevin M. Kruse, historian (Princeton). BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; MA and PhD, Cornell University.

Jamelle Bouie, opinion columnist (*Times*). BA, University of Virginia.

Linda Villarosa, journalist (*Times*). BA, University of Colorado; MA (journalism), City University of New York.

Wesley Morris, journalist (*Times*). BA, Yale University.

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, historian (Harvard). BA (economics), University of Pennsylvania; PhD, Rutgers University.

Bryan Stevenson, attorney. BA, Eastern University; JD, Harvard Law; MA, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard.

Trymaine Lee, journalist (MSNBC). BA, Rowan University.

Jake Silverstein, editor in chief (*Times*). BA (English), Wesleyan University; MA (English), Hollins University; MFA, University of Texas.

Tiya Miles, historian (Harvard). AB, Harvard University; MA, Emory University; PhD, University of Minnesota.

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Mehrsa Baradaran, law professor (University of California at Irvine). BA, Brigham Young University; JD, New York University.

Anne C. Bailey, historian (SUNY Binghamton). AB, Harvard University; MA and PhD, University of Pennsylvania.

This gathering of contributors might not be the ideal panel to reconceive the history of America from the ground up. It looks like there are some significant gaps in their collective knowledge of the country, and perhaps an overemphasis on journalistic approaches. Law, economics, philosophy, the military, the arts, religion, and many other fields are either absent or lightly represented. But this is a mild criticism. The participants weren't invited for the purpose of summoning intellectually diverse views, but because they were known and could be trusted to stay within an agreed-upon framework. They are advocates for a thesis, and it is a thesis that puts racial grievance at the center of America's story.

PREFACE

OCTOBER 1492

WHEN COLUMBUS SET FOOT on Watling's Island in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, he set in train events that would change the whole world. He was, of course, confused about his location. He imagined himself on the outskirts of Asia, which is about twelve thousand miles west of Watling's Island – half the circumference of the Earth. Scholars believe Columbus erred by relying on old books that estimated latitude in Arab miles, which he mistook for shorter Roman miles.

In September 1999, another long-distance voyage failed for similar reasons. Ten months earlier, NASA had fired off the Mars Climate Orbiter. The \$125 million device reached Mars but immediately disintegrated. The design team, led by Lockheed Martin Astronautics, had built the machine using English units of measurement – inches and feet – while the navigation team at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory did its calculations in the metric system.

NASA's accident left a lot of red-faced engineers. Columbus's accident led to Europeans' discovering corn, tomatoes, tobacco, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peppers, pumpkins, peanuts, vanilla, blueberries, and chocolate among some ninety New World crops. These were part of what is now called the Columbian Exchange. Material

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EDWARD DOTY and Edward Leister were among several English servants who landed at Plymouth in November. The *Mayflower* brought no slaves to the new colony. Fifteen months earlier, however, English pirates had landed some twenty to thirty African captives at Jamestown, Virginia. The exact status of these captives is unclear. It is likely that they were considered slaves on board the pirate ship, but because slavery was not recognized by English common law, once the captives landed their status became fuzzy. In Bermuda, also founded by the Virginia Company, slaves brought by outsiders were considered to be indentures with a life tenure of service. In Virginia, the records show that many of the captives were, after a term of indenture, set free. None were recorded as slaves.

Because the *New York Times* in its 1619 Project has declared that the arrival of these captives “inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last the next 250 years,” the event deserves careful scrutiny. The *Times* argues that the captives were sold as slaves and that the event is best understood as the true founding of America. “America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began.”

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The situation, however, is murkier than that. The primary source for what happened in August 1619 is a report from a Virginia settler, John Rolfe, who in January 1620 told the Virginia Company treasurer:

About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunnes arrived at Point-Comfort, the Commandors name Capt Jope, his pilott for the West Indies one Mr Marmaduke an Englishman. They mett wth the Trier [the ship Treasurer] in the West Indyes, and determynd to hold consort shipp hetherward, but in their passage lost one the other. He brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, wch the Governor [Sir George Yeardley] and Cape Merchant [Abraham Peirse] bought for victualle (whereof he was in greate need as he pretended) at the best and easiest rate they could.¹

Rolfe was a figure to be reckoned with. He is also remembered for his marriage in 1614 to Pocahontas and for his introduction to Virginia of a Trinidadian variety of sweet tobacco that proved to be the colony's first successful export.

Trading food to Captain Jope for captive people certainly *sounds* like slavery, but the colony at the time had no system of slavery as such. When the records of this time refer to “slaves,” they generally mean Englishmen who had been convicted of crimes and who were punished by a period of involuntary servitude. In May 1618, for example, the deputy-governor of the Virginia colony proclaimed that residents who failed to attend compulsory church services would “be a slave the following week.”² Human labor could not be wasted by imprisoning those who broke the law.

So what happened to the “20 and odd Negroes” that

Captain Jope brought to Jamestown? It is a matter of debate. Many historians have long held that they were assimilated to the status of indentured laborers, which was the colony's primary source of human labor. Under that system, they would have earned their freedom after a period of years doing mainly agricultural work. Not every form of forced labor is "slavery" in the sense we commonly think. The status of these African captives appears to have fallen into a vaguely defined middle ground. Unlike English indentured servants, they had not signed up for an excursion to Virginia. But unlike the slaves of later times, they had a genuine opportunity to work their way out of bondage, and they had basic rights under the law. A major scholarly examination of the African Americans at Jamestown, published in 2003, suggests that the best term for the condition of the involuntary immigrants of 1619 is "servitude," and that the transition to slavery lay years into the future.³

Not all historians agree. Most notably, Alden T. Vaughan, writing in the 1980s, concluded that all the Negroes who were brought to Virginia in this early period were considered slaves, not indentured servants.⁴

Tim Hashaw, who styles himself an "investigative journalist," is even more insistent that the captives were enslaved. Hashaw's 2007 book, *The Birth of Black America: The First African Americans and the Pursuit of Freedom at Jamestown*, has become the go-to source for those who endorse the *Times*' 1619 narrative. But it is an odd book, in the form of an elaborate conspiracy theory indicting as a liar John Rolfe, the one named witness we have to the arrival of Captain Jope's ship that year. Hashaw believes he has uncovered "a secret Puritan conspiracy at the highest levels of seventeenth-century Europe."⁵ It is an entertaining story that, like any good conspiracy theory, weaves together

an abundance of well-established facts with threads of sheer invention. We do now know quite a bit about the circumstances that led to the arrival of that ship in Jamestown, but it requires some leaps of imagination to reach Hashaw's conclusion that Rolfe was helping to run a clandestine pirate base out of Jamestown as part of a transatlantic operation by Puritans to undermine King James I.

More likely what we have in the arrival of that pirate ship is just another instance of the clumsy opportunism of high-seas brigands. The fuller story of what happened, however, does deserve attention.⁶ A few days or weeks after Captain Jope's arrival at Jamestown on his ship the *White Lion*, a second pirate ship, the *Treasurer*, arrived and landed about six more African captives. The *White Lion* and the *Treasurer* had together intercepted the Spanish slave ship *San Juan Bautista*, which was headed to the port of Veracruz, Mexico. The pirates between them appropriated about sixty of the captives. The *Treasurer* apparently sold some of these captives in Bermuda before heading northwest to Jamestown.

A census of Jamestown taken in March 1620 reported fifteen African men and seventeen African women, presumably all the survivors of the *San Juan Bautista*'s original cargo of 350 captives. These thirty-two individuals had suffered terrible hardships, but they were fortunate in one respect. Had the *San Juan Bautista* arrived in Veracruz, its human cargo would have been sold to labor in the Mexican silver mines – and almost certain early death. Jamestown offered them an opportunity to live and even to thrive. The oppression they were to bear as involuntary captives in the British colony was the less onerous yoke compared to what they had already been through and what other African captives faced under Spanish rule.

How much less onerous is evident in the subsequent

careers of some of those who endured servitude along the shores of the Chesapeake. An especially well-attested case was an individual known as Antonio, who may have been among those individuals sold by Captain Jope in 1619, though he doesn't enter the historical record until two years later when he was set to work on the Bennett family plantation.⁷ He was eventually freed, renamed himself Anthony Johnson, got married, raised children, became a plantation owner himself, and acquired African slaves of his own. He successfully sued one of his white neighbors in a Virginia court.⁸ Plainly, Virginian "slavery" was not a total institution then, nor would it ever become so in the antebellum South.

DO THE FACTS MATTER?

The *Times*' 1619 Project commences with a historical claim that doesn't match the known facts. Jake Silverstein writes that the arrival of those "20 to 30 enslaved Africans" in Virginia "inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years."⁹

A social system based on chattel slavery that was frequently barbaric did eventually arise in some of the British North American colonies, but in Virginia it did not arise until more than half a century later, and even then in small steps. The *New York Times*' sloppiness about historical facts is one reason to approach with caution its claims about 1619 as the decisive moment in America's descent into racial despotism. But it is hardly the only reason. The *Times* sets alarm bells ringing because *they don't seem to care whether their facts are correct.*

The *Times*' attitude can fairly be summarized thus: *What difference does the year make? Slavery commenced at some point during the English colonization of the Atlantic seaboard – if not in*

1619, then a little later. The year 1619 is a convenient date because it was exactly four hundred years before the New York Times proclaimed it as the origin, and because it is well-established as the point when captive Africans were introduced to Jamestown. In other words, even if the *Times* is mistaken on what actually happened, for the paper's editors the symbolic value of the story outweighs any concerns about its factual accuracy.

Both the *Times*, and those who brush aside its factual sloppiness from sympathy with its larger aims, open themselves to self-deception. The *Times*' willingness to embrace fake-but-accurate history means they are all too likely to embrace history that is both fake and inaccurate – and not even realize how far they have strayed from the true record of the past.

Moreover, when the editors responsible for the 1619 Project have been confronted with the errors and contradictions of the *Times*' portrayal of history, they have retreated into a postmodern claim that it is all a *matter of interpretation*. This is exactly what Silverstein, the *Times* magazine's editor in chief, wrote in response to five major historians whose letter to the magazine was published on December 29, 2019. The letter expressed the historians' "strong reservations about important aspects of The 1619 Project." The letter, by Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood – five of America's most prominent academic historians – is important in its own right, and I will come back to it later in this book. But Silverstein's response is jaw-dropping. Refusing to correct any of the inaccuracies, he explains:

Historical understanding is not fixed; it is constantly being adjusted by new scholarship and new voices. Within the

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*world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means.*¹⁰

Historical understanding indeed changes as new facts are brought to light and contexts are better established, but that is never a license to ignore facts that are already established. Silverstein's defense that "historical understanding is not fixed" is a sleight of hand, because the five historians challenged the *Times* about its errors concerning well-known, uncontroverted facts. Silverstein, however, used this specious rationale as warrant to bask in the complacent comfort that the *Times* has accomplished "what we hoped our project would do: expand the reader's sense of the American past." He is blind to the difference between expanding the reader's sense by presenting real history and expanding it into the realm of pseudohistorical polemic.

Silverstein's gambit, alas, is likely to fool most readers. Americans may have become familiar with the dangers of "fake news," but fake history is more insidious. Fake news is typically met with rebuttals by many people who know the facts. Fake history, by contrast, often settles into the background as something "everybody knows." Professional historians and others who have a keen interest in a topic will raise protests, but these can seem like pebbles of fact tossed against an ocean of falsehood. The 1619 mythology in particular will reach millions of Americans who never read the original *Times* declarations of August 2019 and never heard of the 1619 Project itself, but who have been exposed to hundreds of the reverberations – the waves in that ocean of falsehood – that wash over popular culture.

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I should also note that some critics of the 1619 Project have been willing to shrug at the *Times*' 1619 origin myth. For these critics, the more urgent need is to combat the racial rancor and emphasis on victimhood that pervade the 1619 mythology, and to reestablish the Declaration of Independence as the founding moment of the American republic. They point out that scholarly disputes about what happened in coastal Virginia four hundred years ago are unlikely to move the many millions of Americans whose interest is aroused by the prospect of a new way of looking at our history through the lens of racial oppression.

That's only partly correct. Historical facts still matter to many thousands, and the thousands we can persuade about the facts now will help persuade the millions later. The facts may only be pebbles, but amassing them can make a breakwater to bar the tempest of deceit. So I will take some trouble in these pages to join those professional historians who bear witness to the truth, and summarize what actually happened in Virginia in the early seventeenth century.

Let's look a little deeper at the point of origin.

SLAVERIES

We twenty-first-century Americans have certain ideas about what slavery was and what it is. The auction block, the whipping post, and the plantation slave quarters come instantly to mind. Images in popular culture alternately picture slavery in the antebellum South as a kind of cross-racial family bond, as in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and the Hollywood movie version of it (1939), and as a horrific experience, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Modern views come down

decisively in favor of the horrific, which is in keeping with Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). But before the advent of modernity, all the world's great religions, without exception, had given slavery authoritative approval.

What we know of slavery is that it was a system in which members of one race were denied most (but not all) legal rights and were treated as the personal property of their owners. The legal rights of slaves varied over time and from place to place, but masters did not have unlimited power over slaves, at least in the eyes of the law. Slave owners could and did violate those laws. Corporal punishments and separating husbands and wives and selling their children were common. The barbarity of the system was both physical and psychological.

Research on the history of slavery has complicated this picture. We now know that many slaves succeeded in keeping their marriages and their children together. We know that some slaves became skilled artisans who were able to accumulate wealth and sometimes purchase their own freedom. We know that most masters took care of the health of their slaves if for no other reason than the need to protect valuable property. We know that thousands of free persons of color owned slaves. But these qualifications convince no one that slavery was a positive good, as was once argued by figures such as John C. Calhoun.

The contemporary practice of human trafficking for prostitution also contributes strongly to our understanding of antebellum slavery. Campaigns against it claim that up to fifty thousand people a year are trafficked, more than half children, and the majority from Mexico and the Philippines. Estimates of the number of people worldwide caught up in this kind of slavery range from twenty million to forty million.¹¹ This is worth keeping in mind

as an example of how the term "slavery" can be extended to widely divergent forms of human exploitation. What nineteenth-century Southern chattel slavery and modern human trafficking for sex have in common is the radical denial of one person's individual freedom by another.

The brute fact of such oppression makes it hard to get a clear conceptual picture of what slavery is. We wouldn't ordinarily consider as a form of slavery a religious devotee, such as a cloistered monk or nun, who had voluntarily given up personal freedom. Nor do we think of incarcerated prisoners as slaves, though they may be required to perform labor for nominal pay. A salaried worker who feels unable to leave a job because he needs health-insurance benefits or because he is waiting for his stock options to vest is nobody's slave, though he may feel his personal freedom is radically denied. Where does human autonomy leave off and slavery begin?

In my academic discipline of social anthropology, the concept of slavery gets even more complicated because the purpose of enslaving others has varied among human societies. Coercing people to perform manual labor, such as working in tobacco or cotton fields, was seldom the point in sub-Saharan Africa. In some African societies the defining feature of a slave was that he or she had no rights over his or her children. Elsewhere, slaves were merely a commodity collected for their value in trade for other commodities. In some West African kingdoms such as Benin, slaves provided the fodder for large-scale human sacrifices, and much the same can be said of the Aztecs in Mexico.¹² The Ottoman Turks enslaved Europeans to build their armies. In still other societies, slavery took the form of debt bondage, and a debtor could in principle work his way back to freedom.

This spectrum of possibilities must be kept in mind

because the Southern system of plantation slavery did not spring into existence all at once or fully formed. It evolved over time in different contexts according to a host of variable conditions.

Moreover, in the early and middle years of the seventeenth century in Virginia, the subjection of Africans to bondage labor appears not to have resulted initially in any permanent legal disabilities. We know, for example, that men and women released from bondage acquired considerable property and married, often to white settlers. Ira Berlin recounts that “at least one man from every leading free black family – the Johnsons, Paynes, and Driguses – married a white woman.” And “free black women joined together with white men. William Greensted, a white attorney who represented Elizabeth Key, a woman of color, in her successful suit for freedom, later married her.” Berlin depicts a world, especially prior to 1640, in which black and white laborers could “take shelter in the same laws and customs,” and even as race-specific laws began to be enacted, blacks and whites mingled freely, drinking, gambling, and celebrating together.¹³

This picture cannot be reconciled with the image of race-based chattel slavery. It seems especially important that the masters in this period had limited rights over the time of their “slaves” and over their bodies. The summer workweek was five and a half days, with holidays off; and “when planters wished to discipline workers, whether black or white, they often used the courts; not until the next century did slave owners presume that they were absolute sovereigns within the confines of their estate.”¹⁴ Even then, slave owners faced constraints. Throughout the South in the antebellum period, states moved to qualify the power of individual masters – a movement led by masters themselves to rein in the worst among themselves.

Berlin’s account is disputed by some other authorities, notably James Horn in 1619: *Jamestown and the Forging of American Democracy*. Horn supplies further details gleaned from the records about the individuals and then turns to the key question: “Did slavery and racial prejudice gradually evolve in Virginia during the half century following the arrival of the Angolans, or did de facto enslavement of Africans begin in 1619?” Horn weighs the evidence carefully, noting the “absence of legislation formally legalizing slavery in early Virginia,” but ultimately concludes that “the condition of Africans, including the first Angolans, was undoubtedly slavery.”¹⁵

“Undoubtedly” is often what we say when doubt hangs heavily over a topic and no clear answer is at hand. If what the captives of the *White Lion* endured in Virginia is rightly called slavery, it was a far more fluid and flexible form of slavery, a form of bondage before slave codes came into existence. That is not a distinction that matters to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the architect of the *Times*’ 1619 Project. She writes simply, “Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War.”¹⁶

This is expressed in bold indignation, but it collapses history into myth. Untold millions of Africans had been trafficked by Arabs and others for perhaps a thousand years before the Atlantic slave trade began. While a heart-breaking 12.5 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic, the number shipped to North America was only 388,000.¹⁷ Hannah-Jones fires her indignation at British North America, but she loads her weapon with

numbers from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Brazil. The vast majority of the slaves that were later brought to the English colonies on coastal America were purchased (not kidnapped) from the West African slave-trading kingdoms. The slaves taken by the Portuguese for transport to Brazil and Spanish America were largely from West-Central Africa, the kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo, for example, and had been captured in internal wars. Catholicism had become the state religion of the kingdom of Kongo by the end of the fifteenth century. Thus, some of those enslaved in Africa were at least nominal Christians.

From this distance those distinctions may seem not to matter much, but in fact they point to a history rather different from the one Hannah-Jones conjures. Those men and women who were enslaved were not the “beginning of American slavery” but people who, against all odds, had survived an ordeal. In at least some cases they emerged from servitude to become landowners and independent farmers, and created entirely new lives for themselves. America was not yet a place with a fixed identity or even founding ideals. It was sheer possibility. And in some sense these captives recognized it.

We can all wish that these fluid possibilities would have eventually produced a society not stratified by master and slave and racial oppression. But it is a serious misrepresentation of the past to read into the arrival in Jamestown of “20 and odd Negroes” in August 1619 the beginning of slavery and racial oppression in America. Indeed, nowhere on the planet in 1619 can one find an advanced society or civilization functioning without servitude and forms of prejudice and hierarchy.

Was the arrival of the *White Lion* at Jamestown really the founding event of what would become the American

republic? No. It was something, but not that – a minor incident that casts light on a small-scale society that as yet had no firm boundaries or abiding sense of purpose.

VIRGINIA

On July 30, 1619, a few weeks before the arrival of the *White Lion*, Virginia’s General Assembly convened for the first time. It was a signal event in American history, sometimes described as “the beginning of self-government” in British North America.¹⁸ Under instructions from the Virginia Company, Sir George Yeardly, whom the company had appointed governor of the colony, called a representative government to order. The General Assembly was to consist of himself as governor, a Council of State appointed by the company, and twenty-two elected representatives of constituencies that Yeardly designated. These representatives came two each from various settlements (James City, Charles City, the City of Henricus, etc.) and various plantations (Martin’s Hundred, Captain Ward’s Plantation, Flowerdew, etc.).

Historians have spent considerable effort figuring out the relationships between the English crown, the privately owned Virginia Company, and the instruments of local government that the Virginia Company created in Virginia under English law. The Virginia enterprise was conceived as a “commonwealth,” meant to protect the legal rights of the settlers as well as the company’s interests. Before Yeardly was instructed to convene the General Assembly, the colony had been under martial law and “the largely unrestricted powers of the governor.”¹⁹

The creation of Virginia’s General Assembly is rightly understood to be a key event in British colonization. It

planted a seed of self-government, but it was a seed planted in a different system, far more commercial in character from the outset than was the “commonwealth” created by the Mayflower Compact, in which forty-one individuals “covenanted” and combined themselves into a new “civil body politic.”

In Virginia, the General Assembly was imposed by a chartered English corporation. At Plymouth, the settlers invented their own government. In Virginia, the representative body was constructed exclusively of members of the established interests. At Plymouth, care was taken to win the consent even of indentured servants and legal minors. In Virginia, the Virginia Company intended to put in place a system of laws that guaranteed “liberty and reward” and under which every person could know “what he or she may forever challenge as their right.” Those words were written by someone initialed “R.F.” in a letter conveying some of the company’s instructions to Governor Yeardly. R.F. continued:

Last they [the laws] set down what lands or immunities every person is presently to enjoy, according to their merit and quality, and what duties they are tied to, besides many other particulars too long here to write. . . .

And these laws and ordinances are not to be chested or hidden like a candle under a bushel, but in the form of a Magna Carta to be Published to the whole colony, to the end every particular person though never so mean, may both for his own right challenge it and in case he be at any time wronged, through by the best of the country, he may have law to allege for his speedy remedy.²⁰

R.F., speaking for the Virginia Company, plainly conveys some distrust of the colony’s political elite, whom he sus-

pects will not be eager to convey the news to the common folk that they have enforceable rights under the law. The language also makes clear that the new system is intended to uphold the distinctions of “merit and quality” among the colonists, although it gives some protections to those lower on the social scale who had suffered considerably under the previous system of aristocratic domination.

The situation at Plymouth differed profoundly. Daniel Webster, invited to speak at Plymouth’s bicentenary anniversary in 1820, emphasized how the community freed itself from the burden of aristocratic rule, with “no lands yielding rent, and no tenants rendering service.” Plymouth pivoted to “political institutions” that respected private property divided equitably. It abolished primogeniture, and property “was all freehold.”²¹ This was a small-scale egalitarian community that aimed at something more than just self-rule. It aimed at maintaining the freedom and dignity of individuals. Webster no doubt exaggerates. The Plymouth colonists were not immune to self-interest, but they plainly started out in an egalitarian spirit.

When the Angolan slaves set foot on Virginia soil in August 1619, they happened to arrive at exactly the moment when it had been ordained that “every particular person though never so mean” had legal rights and remedies. Whether we call these individuals slaves or captives or indentured servants or (as the records sometimes put it) simply Negroes, they had rights, and it was not long before some of them realized it and took successful action. The Virginia Company had not foreseen the arrival of “slaves” and had made no special provision for them. The General Assembly appeared in no haste to distinguish these involuntary immigrants from other laborers, and so for several decades the colony accommodated

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itself to people pursuing their interests with little regard to racial distinction. This fluidity, of course, was not to last, but for a time, race in America harbored an alternative future.

CHAPTER THREE

AUGUST 2019

THE SUBSTANCE OF the 1619 Project cannot be separated from its packaging. The project is above all a media campaign, which commenced with the publication of the special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. Once that is understood, we can see how the project's content falls into place.

Let's start with the cover of that special issue. It features a black-and-white photo of an empty ocean horizon, with these words superimposed on dark water:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.

No ship appears on the horizon: just a calm, featureless sea under a cloudy, gray sky.

Inside the magazine is a note titled "Behind the Cover" that credits Dannielle Bowman with the photo of "the water off the coast of Hampton, Va., at the site

Chapter Three

films, television series and documentaries, unscripted programming and other forms of entertainment.” Hannah-Jones and Winfrey will be coproducers.¹³

CHAPTER FOUR

1776

THE 1619 PROJECT has attracted critics the way a porchlight attracts moths – and with much the same effect. The light keeps on shining and the moths keep fluttering around it, batting their wings at it pointlessly. The moths in this case are mostly scholars, though there are some who are journalists or independent cultural commentators. The criticisms that have been leveled at the 1619 Project are in many cases valid and, in other circumstances, might be devastating. But the 1619 porchlight goes right on shining, undimmed by the commotion around it.

One reason for that is the *Times*’ massive publicity campaign for the project. That campaign reaches millions, whereas the critics can expect to reach at best a few tens of thousands. Such imbalance, however, is only one aspect of the 1619 Project’s immunity. The critics are also up against the spirit of triumph – the sheer joy – with which supporters of its core claims have greeted the project. It has been met with popular jubilation of the sort that will not pause merely because some professors have raised issues of factual accuracy. A scholar who points to specific errors is forced to review the context of long-past events and examine details that are unfamiliar to many

readers. Those are ineffective tools for planting seeds of doubt among those who have been swept up in exuberant appreciation of the 1619 Project's vast generalizations.

In the early days of the promotional campaign for the project, Hannah-Jones made a point of emphasizing the extraordinarily high standards she set for herself and other contributors. She told one host of a panel discussion, "When you see the finished product you can't really understand all the messiness and ugliness and despair that goes into making it. It was definitely the hardest thing both emotionally and just in terms of the pressure to get it right – not something that would further demean our ancestors; to tell the story the best way and also to understand *every fact had to be right because I knew people were going to come for this reframing.*" Addressing the host, she went on, "When you were saying we are not going to deify our Founders, and the people at the bottom, we were actually going to say, were the most American of all, *you better have your facts right because you know people are going to want to take that down*"¹ (my emphasis).

Hannah-Jones was certainly right to anticipate that her counternarrative of American history would be subject to skeptical review by experts, but her confidence in the factual accuracy of her work was ill-founded. Soon it became clear that many of her assertions were simply false, and some were outrageously false. In this situation, she came to rely on her personal celebrity to avoid dealing with the inaccuracies and on the power of the *Times* to shut out the voices of critics. The critics were left not voiceless but largely unheeded.

Perhaps this would not have happened if we lived at a time when Americans had a better grasp of our history. In the last twenty years, study after study has confirmed the alarming loss of our historical literacy. Fewer than

half of American college students in one study could place the Civil War within the correct half century.² More than a third of the general public cannot name any rights protected by the First Amendment. Nearly three-quarters of Americans can't name the three branches of government.³ Only 12 percent of US high school students are scored "proficient" in American history.⁴ Many elite colleges and universities fail not only to require their undergraduates to take a course in American history but to require history majors to take one course in American history.

In generations past, children learned such basic facts and a great deal more about American history in grade school, and that learning was reinforced in high school; for those who pursued a college education, it was reinforced through required college courses in American history. But this sort of instruction has been diminished in favor of "social studies" and an educational emphasis on multiculturalism. Thus, a very large number of Americans are ill-equipped to recognize basic factual errors in an account of the American past that sounds, at least superficially, plausible. Politically correct themes get across but not much in the way of learning about the complexities of history. Much of American education has pivoted from teaching to messaging.

POSTMODERN POSTHISTORY

The historians and other critics who point to flaws in the 1619 Project's account of the American past face that barrier as well: fewer people than ever have a basic framework to recognize the validity of the criticism. To this we can add yet another reason why the historians and critics may have a hard time convincing the general public: the rise of academic "postmodernism." This is

the idea that almost everything is a matter of interpretation, and few things (or nothing at all) can be resolved by discovering the facts of the matter. A thoroughgoing postmodernist insists that there are no facts, but just “facts,” that is, claims that get accepted as true for a while. But any such “fact” is really just someone’s assertion, and someone else could assert a different “fact” that would be just as good.

Postmodernism has another facet that is also relevant to the 1619 Project: postmodernism favors the stories told by the “oppressed.” It divides society into two parts, the privileged and those whom the privileged exploit. Among the privileges the privileged people enjoy is to tell their own version of history as though it were the absolute truth of what happened in the past. They tell this story to explain and justify their dominant position in society, and they insist on teaching it to those whom they dominate. The poor and oppressed, according to this aspect of postmodernism, rarely get to tell their own versions of history, but they do enjoy a special kind of truth-telling. From the vantage point of being unfairly disadvantaged, they have insight into the lies and self-serving stories told by their oppressors. These insights are necessarily fragmented because the rich and powerful control the main opportunities to build grand and comprehensive accounts of the past. The oppressed often have only unofficial and slightly hidden ways to tell their stories, such as popular songs, folktales, graffiti, and blogs.

The 1619 Project offers a particular version of this kind of postmodernism. The “privileged” in this version are American whites, and their self-serving explanations for their privileged position are a version of history that covers up and excuses the reality of “white supremacy.” The 1619 Project aims to unseat white supremacy by

bringing forward a powerfully unified version of those insights that black Americans have had all along but have never before had the opportunity to express as a complete narrative. This is what Hannah-Jones means when she blogs that the project will not only reframe the history of America but also reframe “the unparalleled role black people have played in this democracy.” The project aims to demolish one version of history and replace it with another crafted to appeal to black pride.

Americans have not embraced postmodernism in its most aggressive form, but it has seeped into popular culture. When people say, “You have your truth, and I have mine,” they are acting like good postmodernists. And this sort of argument by sheer assertion has gained tremendous ground though social media, where no one stands as the final arbiter between established truth, mere opinion, and outright fabrication. Instead, we each have our own views, and who is to say that your views are any better than mine? To a large extent these matters don’t get settled. Instead they get referred to a circle of like-minded people who support one another and who typically ignore those who hold differing views. Or, if sufficiently aggravated, the like-minded form a digital mob that attacks the dissenter.

We need to keep all of this in mind as we consider what happened when historians and critics began to weigh the factual claims in the 1619 Project.

We also need to keep in mind that, because the 1619 Project is an effort to make slavery the central fact of American history and to elevate racial division over all other considerations, the discussion is fraught with racial sensitivities. Many of the project’s most ardent supporters are African-American. Many of its non-African-American supporters are political progressives; others are centrist

liberals; and still others conservatives who support the basic idea that American history should be “reframed” in a manner that brings racial division into far greater prominence. Most of the critics themselves defer to this basic idea and present their complaints as efforts to improve the argument of the 1619 Project rather than to discredit it.

But I for one don’t think we can take discrediting off the table. How far from the truth can a historical interpretation run before we conclude that it is, fundamentally, a *mis*interpretation?

Hannah-Jones’s interpretation of the American Revolution is a case in point.

A SUPPLY OF DOUBTFUL CLAIMS

Several of the historians who have found fault with the 1619 Project have indeed focused on Hannah-Jones’s claim that the American Revolution was fought to protect American slave owners from the threat of abolition by the British authorities. Before we turn to their case, however, it is important to note that this interpretation is the first of five main lines of criticism of the 1619 Project that have emerged. The second is Hannah-Jones’s contention that Lincoln was a racist whose primary intent was to keep blacks and whites separate; third, her assertion that, “For the most part, black Americans fought back alone”; fourth, the claim advanced most explicitly by 1619 Project contributor Matthew Desmond that plantation slavery was the foundation of American capitalism; and fifth, the thesis of the entire project that the nation’s history is best understood as a struggle by American blacks against white supremacy. I deal in later chapters with each of these except the fought-back-alone claim, which I’ll dismiss

right now. It simply ignores the abolition movement, created and sustained for a century by white Americans. It likewise ignores the huge role of white Americans in the post-Civil War constitutional amendments, and in the civil rights movement. Contrary to what Hannah-Jones contends, black Americans were never alone in their fight against racial injustice. Her declaration on this is the most transparently false of all of her many falsehoods.

These five lines of criticism do not exhaust the 1619 Project’s supply of doubtful claims. The project, for example, includes the essays “Why Doesn’t the United States Have Universal Health Care? The Answer Begins with Policies Enacted after the Civil War,” by Jeneen Interlandi; “A Traffic Jam in Atlanta Would Seem to Have Nothing to Do with Slavery: But Look Closer. . .,” by Kevin M. Kruse; and “Slavery Gave America a Fear of Black People and a Taste for Violent Punishment: Both Still Define Our Criminal-Justice System,” by Bryan Stevenson.

Whole books could be written in opposition to any of these claims – and that may well happen in the next few years. But let’s say a word about one of the essays that has so far attracted little attention, Wesley Morris’s “For Centuries Black Music, Forged in Bondage, Has Been the Sound of Complete Artistic Freedom – No Wonder Everybody Is Always Stealing It.” Morris provides an excellent genealogy of how black music for two centuries has influenced and been influenced by other American musical idioms, giving us “the confused thrill of integrated culture.”⁵ Although he makes the obligatory nods to the *Times*’ racial oppression thesis, his essay sings in a different key. It is actually celebratory.

The 1619 Project isn’t all bad. It is just wrong in crucial places.

WHEN INDIGNATION OVERCOMES JUDGMENT

The manner in which Hannah-Jones recounts the story of the American Revolution is as important as the story itself. In the lead article in the magazine, she begins by recounting how her father “always flew an American flag in our front yard.”⁶ A son of Mississippi sharecroppers, he grew up in segregated Iowa and joined the army at seventeen. After his service, he ended up in menial jobs, and the young Hannah-Jones could not “understand his patriotism.” She segues to her learning through “cultural osmosis that the flag wasn’t really ours,” and that she is heir instead to the horrific history of American slavery. This sets up some of Hannah-Jones’s most pungent lines: “Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom.” That’s because freedom has been so often denied to black Americans, though they deeply understand why it is important and, generation upon generation, seek to fulfill the nation’s basic promise. But that promise is elusive: “The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie.” The ideal is that “all men are created equal” and are “endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.” The lie is the false suggestion that this principle would be applied to black people in America, whose rights had indeed been alienated: “But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst.”

At this point Hannah-Jones’s indignation overcomes her judgment. It was not “men” who drafted those words, but one man in particular. Thomas Jefferson as a slaveholder stands exposed in the judgment of history as a hypocrite, but the question of whether he believed “all

men are created equal” is more complicated than that. Could he have believed it and not acted on it?

If we are looking for a man who is utterly consistent in turning his ideals into practice, we won’t find him in Jefferson – or perhaps in any man. The ideals that Jefferson gave voice to in the Declaration of Independence, however, reached far beyond the sometimes tawdry circumstances of his life. We have a word for that kind of ideal: transcendent. The principles of the Declaration of Independence transcended the moment and the age in which they were written. They summoned Americans to try harder and for later generations to go further in seeking their fulfillment.

I would suppose that is the reason why Hannah-Jones’s father kept that American flag in the front yard and replaced it “as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.” He knew what it was about. And he knew it in a way that eludes his daughter.

Having reached the point of the Founders’ violent denial of freedom and justice for all, Hannah-Jones turns to the slave Robert Hemmings, who waited on Jefferson when he was in Philadelphia in 1776 for the Continental Congress. Hemmings’s presence is a detail worth remembering, but it again prompts Hannah-Jones to an indignant effusion that goes several steps too far: “Enslaved people *were not recognized as human beings* but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently” (emphasis added). Hannah-Jones herself backtracks in the sentence that immediately follows her declaration that enslaved people were not recognized as human beings, writing: “Jefferson’s fellow white colonists *knew that black people were human beings*, but they created a network of laws

and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such" (emphasis added).

In one sentence enslaved blacks "were not recognized" by whites as human beings, and in the very next sentence whites "knew" they "were." What are we to make of this kind of writing?

Possibly it is just carelessness, but it strongly suggests that Hannah-Jones confuses two ideas: the recognition of common humanity and the concept of private property in human beings. The second idea is repellent to modern Americans, and it was distasteful to many Americans of Jefferson's time too. As Americans tend to see it today, slavery "dehumanized" people by treating them as objects and denying their basic human capacities for ties of affection and family connection, and even the capacity to feel pain the way others felt it. Such dehumanizing, of course, went only so far. Slaves resisted; masters recognized that better ways than brute force existed to elicit the desired behavior. In most places, in most times, masters sought to enslave others precisely because of the extreme control it gave them over another person's labor.

The "dehumanizing" view of slavery reflects modern assumptions about humans as first of all individuals whose interior life and sense of self-ownership are primary. Applying this to antebellum slavery may be misleading. People who are captured and forced into slavery are stripped of their original status in the society into which they had been embedded. If we recognize that belonging in a community with its own norms, values, and dense network of relationships is a key aspect of being human, slavery can be seen as a negation of that primary sense of belonging. Note how much this differs

from focusing on the slave as a distressed individual. The focus instead is on the despoiling of the prior relationships that comprise cultural identity. The newly enslaved person suffers a social death. But that isn't the end of the story. Slaves, even from disparate origins, soon form their own community with its own norms, values, and dense network of relationships. Hereditary slavery, which dominated in the South, became a culture unto itself. It was a stigmatized culture and slaves were oppressed, but slaves were not "dehumanized" in this other sense.

Slavery was ignominious, not dehumanizing. Among those who suffered the restrictions on personal autonomy imposed by slavery, a very human spirit survived.

The idea that individual human beings had natural rights and that personal freedom was vital to human flourishing often mattered little in the general course of human history, but these ideas began to matter a great deal more in the eighteenth-century British colonies in North America because of an antislavery crusade that was unique in the history of the world. America, contrary to Hannah-Jones, was born not in the midst of indifference to slavery but in the gathering storm of principled opposition to slavery.

The flat contradiction between Hannah-Jones's back-to-back sentences – slaves were *not* recognized as human beings; slaves *were* recognized as human beings – is among the characteristic challenges of her writing. In her zeal to make a strong rhetorical point she often capsizes her argument. Rather than correct the error, she just swims ahead. And what lies ahead is even greater folly.

In 1776 Jefferson busied himself in Philadelphia in composing a denunciation of Britain's mistreatment of the American colonies. But, says Hannah-Jones, he left out the real reason the colonies are seeking independence: "Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." This is an astonishing claim – astonishing not least to the historians who know the most about the American founding.

One of the first to be astonished – indeed probably the first to read this claim – is a professor of history at Northwestern University, Leslie M. Harris, who is African-American and specializes in American urban history, the African diaspora, and African-American history. On her faculty page she lists her principal research interests as "Pre-Civil War African-American Labor and Social History; History and Historiography of U.S. Slavery; Urban History; Southern History; History of Women, Gender and Sexuality." Her most important book is *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863*.

Harris was a natural person for the *New York Times* to turn to when the *Times*' fact-checker (name unknown) sought a second opinion on Hannah-Jones's assertion that the colonists were driven to declare their independence in order to preserve slavery. Harris plainly told the fact-checker that the claim was false. We know this because Harris, after six months of public silence, published in *Politico* magazine a bombshell essay, "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project: The *Times* Ignored Me."

The moment of astonishment for Harris came the day after the *Times* launched the 1619 Project. Harris and

Hannah-Jones had been invited to discuss the project on Georgia Public Radio. Harris writes, "On August 19 of last year I listened in stunned silence as Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter for the *New York Times*, repeated an idea that I had vigorously argued against with her fact-checker: that the patriots fought the American Revolution in large part to preserve slavery in North America."⁷

Harris is by no means an opponent of the 1619 Project, which she describes as "a much-needed corrective to the blindly celebratory histories that once dominated our understanding of the past – histories that wrongly suggested racism and slavery were not a central part of U.S. history." Her concern was that factual inaccuracies could jeopardize this important corrective. In particular, she worried that "critics would use the overstated claim" that the Revolution was fought to protect slavery "to discredit the entire undertaking. So far, that's exactly what has happened." Not that this false interpretation of the Revolution is the only problem Harris spotted. She also observed how Hannah-Jones scrambled chronology and erased differences: "In addition, the paper's characterizations of slavery in early America reflected laws and practices more common in the antebellum era than in Colonial times, and did not accurately illustrate the varied experiences of the first generation of enslaved people that arrived in Virginia in 1619." But Harris primarily worried about what would happen when the critics showed up, and her worry came true: "That one sentence about the role of slavery in the founding of the United States has ended up at the center of a debate over the whole project."⁸

Harris takes note of both the "academic historians" who demanded that the *Times* issue corrections and the "emboldened" conservatives who argued that the 1619

Chapter Four

Project is “flat-out illegitimate.” She mentions a planned “1620 Project” that focused instead on “the Mayflower Landing at Plymouth Rock.”⁹ Although that was not a reference to my own organization, the National Association of Scholars, in fact the NAS responded the day after the *Times* released its opening salvo with our “1620 Project.” And this book bears the title *1620*. While Harris and Hannah-Jones were speaking on Georgia Public Radio, my colleagues and I were discussing how we might answer the *Times*’ intent to bypass the long struggle to establish a republic in America founded on the ideals of liberty, equality, and justice.

This is not to say that the history of slavery should be ignored. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find another historical subject that has produced a greater volume of scholarship over the last half century than slavery. American historians have rightly seen it as a crucial part of our past and a reality that continues to bear on the present. The arguments aren’t about the importance of slavery per se, but about how slavery shaped our politics, economics, other social institutions, and cultural life. No valid history can make the entire history of America, from the colonial era, to the republic, through the Civil War, to the present as *only* about slavery or slavery and racism together. That’s a gross distortion of our past. And one need not position oneself as “conservative” to see this.

Harris understands this and takes some trouble to find fault with critics who are by no means conservative, such as Gordon Wood and Sean Wilentz. So as not to overtax the reader with examples, I will follow the thread of only these two.

CHAPTER FIVE

1775

WHEN THE HISTORIAN Sean Wilentz pointed to the “cynicism” of the 1619 Project’s thesis, his criticism was impossible to ignore. Wilentz is a chaired professor of the American Revolutionary Era at Princeton University. He is the author of numerous books, most pertinently his 2018 work *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding*. He focuses on class and race in the early republic and is widely known for his liberal political views. He won the 2006 Bancroft Prize – the highest award for a historian – for his book *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*.

Wilentz entered the public controversy over the 1619 Project by means of a lecture he gave at the Newark Public Library, in New Jersey, on November 4, 2019. He published the lecture, “American Slavery and ‘the Relentless Unforeseen,’” two weeks later in *The New York Review of Books*, perhaps the most prominent journal for the left-leaning intelligentsia in America. Wilentz’s major theme in the essay is how the people involved in major historical events have limited knowledge of what is happening around them and no certainty at all about what will follow. History is not a chain of inevitabilities. It is, rather, a struggle

among those inspired by different ideals and interests. In retrospect we can see the tide turning in certain conflicts, where one side gains a permanent lead, but that clarity comes only with the passing of considerable time.

Wilentz thus rejects the idea that Emancipation was “preordained,” or that human bondage was something that the Western world would inevitably have brought to an end. It ended only because “suddenly, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, Western culture reached a turning point.” Western thinkers set off a “moral revolution” focused on finding laws and principles that would bring about a rational order. And this perspective for the first time in human history cast slavery as “a barbaric offense to God, reason, and natural rights.”¹

A few – and at first they were very few – individuals stepped forward to declare that slavery is fundamentally wrong. Wilentz cites the Philadelphia Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, who published an attack on slavery in 1754. Woolman gathered followers, and a network slowly took shape so that by the mid-1770s “a significant number of reformers and intellectuals had come to regard American slavery as pure evil.”² These abolitionists would eventually prevail, but it would take nearly a hundred years and the horrendous blood-letting of the Civil War to fully realize in the United States the emancipation they sought. They may have succeeded sooner if they had offered step-by-step approaches. Leading abolitionists who argued for immediate and universal emancipation alarmed their countrymen, who feared the abolitionists’ apparent desire to level everything.

Wilentz recounts how antislavery politics collided with the popular views of southerners such as South Carolinian Charles Pinckney, who rejected the notion that the Declaration of Independence applied to blacks, slave or

free. In light of such feelings, “slavery’s defeat was not inevitable.” It is only at this point that Wilentz turns his attention to the 1619 Project, which resembles, “ironically, the reactionary proslavery insistence [such as Pinckney’s] that the egalitarian self-evident truths of the Declaration were self-evident lies.” Wilentz characterizes that view as the “cynicism” that “is on display in *The New York Times Magazine*’s recently launched 1619 Project.”³

WHAT HANNAH-JONES DOES AND DOES NOT SAY

The linchpin of that cynicism is Nikole Hannah-Jones’s essay in which she asserts that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” Wilentz, having spent much of his career studying the actual reasons the colonists decided to declare independence, will have none of this. He goes after Hannah-Jones’s supposed evidence for her extraordinary claim. She presents two arguments for this. First:

By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. . . . In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue.⁴

The quadruple negatives in that last sentence are a challenge, but Hannah-Jones plainly thinks the Founders saw

both a threat to slavery and a slavery-based opportunity to revolt.

Hannah-Jones's second argument is that "there is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence."⁵ Or, she adds, in the Constitution, drafted eleven years later, though various provisions of the Constitution deal with slavery without using the word.

There are two strands of evidence that Hannah-Jones might have brought up in her essay but didn't. These soon emerged in comments by other people. I mention them here to forestall confusion. One is the *Somerset* decision in 1772 by the Court of the King's Bench that outlawed chattel slavery in England and Wales, though not in Britain's overseas holdings. James Somerset was a black slave owned by a British customs officer, who purchased Somerset in Boston. When the customs officer brought him to England, Somerset escaped. He was recaptured, imprisoned, and told he would be resold to a plantation in Jamaica, but his Christian godparents brought suit on his behalf. With the help of Granville Sharp, an abolitionist, Somerset's lawyers argued that English common law did not permit slavery – and the court agreed. There were very few slaves in England, and the ruling thus had little effect. It did not apply to the slave trade in which British merchants and ships continued to participate, and it had no bearing on Britain's overseas colonies.

The other evidence that Hannah-Jones could have cited but did not is Dunmore's Proclamation, issued on November 15, 1775. Dunmore was the royal governor of Virginia. After armed hostilities broke out in the Battles of Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1775, British authorities began to look for ways to undermine support for the revolutionaries. Dunmore attempted to do this by

declaring martial law and offering freedom to indentured servants and slaves who would desert their masters, enlist in the British cause, and bear arms against the revolutionaries. Over the course of the war, an estimated one hundred thousand slaves attempted to escape, but those who enlisted with Dunmore were few. Estimates range from eight hundred to two thousand, and these did not fare well. When Dunmore left Virginia, only three hundred left with him.

WILENTZ'S RESPONSE

Wilentz's response to Hannah-Jones's thesis is straightforward and unequivocal: "this portion of the 1619 Project is simply untrue." The British weren't "deeply conflicted" over the slave trade, slavery in the colonies, or slavery in North America.⁶ They were complacent. The handful of abolitionists in England had no traction with the public or the government. Wilentz himself introduces the *Somerset* decision and the abolitionist Granville Sharp by way of pointing out how limited that 1772 decision was. Britain had no interest in ending slavery in the colonies, and there was no popular movement to do so. Indeed, no country in the world surpassed Great Britain in the eighteenth century in supplying the Americas with slaves. The crown jewel of its American empire at that time was the slave-based sugar plantation colony of Jamaica. It would import more than one million African slaves during its history, second only to Brazil.

By bringing up a point that could have counted in favor of Hannah-Jones's argument, Wilentz demonstrates how a scrupulous historian goes about the work of weighing the relevant evidence on the other side of the question. The rest of his rather long essay is a detailed account of

how the gathering forces of abolition faced off against the defenders of slavery during and after the Revolution. His conclusion: "Revolutionary America, far from a pro-slavery bulwark against the supposedly enlightened British Empire, was a hotbed of antislavery politics, arguably the hottest and most successful of its kind in the Atlantic world prior to 1783."⁷

Wilentz's *New York Review* essay deserves to be read in its entirety, especially by anyone who is inclined to think that Hannah-Jones was just exercising a little interpretive license in making out that the American Revolution was fought to protect slavery. Interpretive license doesn't extend to making up a story that is the dead opposite of the truth.

Wilentz returned to the fray in January 2020 with another long essay, this time in *The Atlantic*. In "A Matter of Facts," Wilentz argues that "no effort to educate the public in order to advance social justice can afford to dispense with a respect for basic facts" – which respect he finds wanting in the 1619 Project. He returns, this time in elaborate detail, to the *Somerset* case and Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, showing how Silverstein, the *Times* magazine editor, had misrepresented them in his reply to the letter from Wilentz and the other historians calling the project's claims into question. As Wilentz observes, "Hannah-Jones's argument is built on partial truths and misstatement of the facts, which combine to impart a fundamentally misleading impression."⁸

GORDON WOOD'S RESPONSE

Gordon Wood, who teaches history at Brown University, is also among the most eminent of American historians. His 1992 book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, won the Pulitzer Prize, and his 1969 book, *The Creation of*

the American Republic, won the Bancroft Prize. A more recent work, his 2009 volume in the Oxford History of the United States, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, was a finalist for another Pulitzer Prize.

The authority that the *Times* had conferred on Hannah-Jones got Gordon Wood's dander up. A few days after Wilentz's essay appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted an interview with Wood.⁹ The *what* website? Many on both left and right did a double take when they heard about this. Wood is not known as a socialist, but he was not the first well-known historian to air his dissent from the 1619 Project in this forum. Several editors of the left-wing site began posting articles criticizing the 1619 Project in September 2019, and then turned to posting interviews about it with prominent historians. (Socialist opposition to the 1619 Project is a fascinating crosscurrent in this story that I come back to in chapter 11.)

Wood told the interviewer that he was "surprised" when he saw the *Times* magazine and read Hannah-Jones's essay. His surprise went straight to her claims "that the Revolution occurred primarily because of the Americans' desire to save their slaves." His worry, he says, is that the 1619 Project is "going to become the basis for high school education and has the authority of the *New York Times* behind it, and yet it is so wrong in so many ways." The interviewer presses the point about the *Times*' failure to seek the counsel of "one of the foremost authorities on the American Revolution." Wood affirms he was not approached and adds, "None of the leading scholars of the whole period from the Revolution to the Civil War, as far as I know, have been consulted."¹⁰

In the interview, Wood explains that, at the time the Constitution was written, "nearly everybody knew" that

slavery was “a barbaric thing” and wrongly assumed it was “on the road to extinction.” It is the American Revolution that makes slavery “a problem for the world.” Without the Revolution, slavery would have continued in the British Empire indefinitely. The British didn’t “get around to freeing the slaves in the West Indies until 1833,” and would not have done it then either except that West Indian planters could no longer call on Southern support. Wood bats aside Hannah-Jones’s central claim: “I just don’t think there is much evidence for it, and in fact the contrary is more true to what happened. The Revolution unleashed antislavery sentiments that led to the first abolition movements in the history of the world.”¹¹

Gordon Wood’s displeasure with the 1619 Project didn’t stop there. As noted in chapter 2, he was one of the five historians (the others being Wilentz, Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, and James Oakes) who wrote to the *Times* to urge the editors to correct several factual errors that the project was propagating. The first of these errors is Hannah-Jones’s assertion about the cause of the American Revolution. The letter states:

On the American Revolution, pivotal to any account of our history, the project asserts that the founders declared the colonies’ independence of Britain “in order to ensure slavery would continue.” This is not true. If supportable, the allegation would be astounding – yet every statement offered by the project to validate it is false.

The five historians anticipated that the *Times* might call this just a matter of interpretation, so they added: “These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or ‘framing.’ They are matters of verifi-

able fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism.”¹²

Silverstein replied at some length but evaded the substance of the historians’ letter and ended up declaring, exactly as the historians feared, that it is all a matter of interpretation. Among the editor’s observations: “Historical understanding is not fixed. Within the world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means.”¹³

He defends Hannah-Jones’s peculiar account of the American Revolution by citing David Waldstreicher, Alfred W. Blumrosen and Ruth G. Blumrosen, and Jill Lepore as upholding the idea that some American slaveholders had some “uneasiness” about the “growing anti-slavery movement in Britain.” In fact there was no such movement, but it had now become important for the *Times* to discover some shred of credibility for the idea. Waldstreicher is a professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the author of several books on slavery, including *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (2009) and *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (2004). The Blumrosens were civil rights attorneys and law professors who published *Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies and Sparked the American Revolution* (2005). Lepore, a historian at Harvard, has recently published *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018), which includes a single sentence crediting Dunmore’s Proclamation (offering the slaves of Patriots their freedom if they joined the British forces) as tipping “the scales in favor of American independence.”¹⁴

On the authority of Silverstein, we can say that Hannah-Jones didn't make up her thesis out of thin air. Though she didn't cite Waldstreicher, the Blumrosens, or Lepore, these writers offer the precedent of having indulged similar surmises.

Silverstein's reply (published on December 20, 2019, and updated on January 4, 2020) offered no corrections to the 1619 Project essays. Gordon Wood, however, did not let the matter go. He responded with a public letter to Silverstein, reiterating that he has "no quarrel with the idea behind the project." Paying more attention to "the importance of slavery in the history of our country is essential." But Wood's displeasure with the factual sloppiness of the 1619 Project reaches a new level in his letter. The "interpretations" the project puts forward are "perverse and distorted." He adds, "We all want justice, but not at the expense of truth." Wood quotes Hannah-Jones's thesis yet again and demolishes it:

I don't know of any colonist who said that they wanted independence in order to preserve their slaves. No colonist expressed alarm that the mother country was out to abolish slavery in 1776. If southerners were concerned about losing their slaves, why didn't they make efforts to ally with the slaveholding planters in the British West Indies?

And he goes on: "Far from preserving slavery the North saw the Revolution as an opportunity to abolish the institution. The first anti-slave movements in the history of the world, supported by whites as well as blacks, took place in the northern states in the years immediately following 1776."¹⁵ He couldn't have made it any plainer.

Wood was still not done attacking the veracity of the project in general and Hannah-Jones's the-Revolution-

was-fought-to-protect-slavery thesis in particular. In February 2020, reviewing Mary Beth Norton's book *1774* in the *Wall Street Journal*, Wood begins by launching some arrows at the 1619 Project and Silverstein's defense of it. Wood seems especially intent on deflating Lepore's hapless sentence about the importance of Dunmore's Proclamation, which Silverstein had marshaled in support. Norton's book "shows conclusively that the scales had been tipped [Lepore's metaphor] in favor of independence long before Dunmore issued his proclamation." He concludes the review by hammering that nail one more time. "And never in [Norton's] detailed account of that long year does she declare that the protection of slavery had anything to do with bringing about independence."¹⁶

THE TIMES RETREATS — A BIT

On March 11, 2020, after seven months of battering by historians, the *Times* retreated a tiny bit. Prompted by the revelation five days earlier by Leslie Harris that her fact-checking for the *Times* had been ignored, Silverstein posted "An Update to The 1619 Project," in which he offered "a clarification to a passage" in Hannah-Jones's essay. Referring to Hannah-Jones's statement that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery," Silverstein said that the *Times* recognizes that some readers may have interpreted this to mean that "protecting slavery was a primary motivation for *all* of the colonists." The wording has now been changed to say "some of" the colonists.¹⁷

This surely puts the *Times* on technically safe ground. If there were only two colonists out of the roughly 2.5 million in 1776 who believed that they should rebel

against the British government because Britain might one day abolish slavery, the new sentence would be accurate. But of course the *Times* means to imply a great deal more than that. The insinuation is that the historians who complained were picking on an errant detail, and that fear of Britain emancipating American slaves really was a major factor in the American Revolution. Other than Lepore in one incorrect sentence, which she backed away from, no reputable historian believes this as a characterization of the Revolution as a whole, and only one major historian – whom we will come to shortly – sees it as a factor in Virginia.

But the *Times* is still determined to uphold its thesis, or as Silverstein puts it in the notice, “We stand behind the basic point, which is that among the various motivations that drove the patriots toward independence was a concern that the British would seek or were already seeking to disrupt in various ways the entrenched system of American slavery.”¹⁸ That rephrasing, of course, climbs down from Hannah-Jones’s “one of the primary reasons.” Silverstein tries to nuance his way to safer ground like a man trying to find his footing in a bog. The problem is that the one time the British showed any interest in disrupting American slavery – Dunmore’s Proclamation – came six months after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, which were themselves the outcome of a profound disaffection with British rule that had been gathering strength for years.

The Stamp Act passed in March 1765. The Boston Massacre was in March 1770. The Boston Tea Party, executed by the Sons of Liberty, was in December 1773. Not so long ago, every American schoolchild knew what these events were and how they led up to the Revolution. While there is room to debate how the “the various moti-

vations that drove the patriots toward independence” should be weighed next to one another and how they came together to spark an armed rebellion, there is no room at all to change the chronology and teleport Dunmore’s Proclamation into the period when revolutionary sentiment was building.

A small case can be made that Dunmore’s Proclamation further inflamed slave owners in Virginia, but intensifying an ongoing rebellion is pretty far from “one of the primary reasons” for the Revolution.

Does Silverstein have anything more than this to buttress his now weaker version of Hannah-Jones’s claim? Yes, and we need to pay attention to it.

VIRGINIA’S DISCONTENTS

Silverstein does not go into any detail, but he invokes “the past 40 years or so of early American historiography” as paying attention to “the role of slavery and the agency of enslaved people in driving events of the Revolutionary period.”¹⁹ He cites only one historian, Alan Taylor, who teaches at the University of Virginia, and whose works include the 2014 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832*.

Hannah-Jones never referred to Taylor, nor did Silverstein mention him in his earlier defense of Hannah-Jones’s essay. Regardless of whether they knew of Taylor when the 1619 Project was being written or he came to their attention later, he is highly relevant.

Taylor’s book focuses on the War of 1812, but he devotes a chapter to the Revolution, in which he does indeed say some things that fit with Hannah-Jones’s thesis. He writes, for example, that the *Somerset* decision was “widely reported in the American press” and “caused a

sensation.” And, “Virginia’s leaders feared that Parliament might eventually legislate against slavery in America.”²⁰ This is eye-opening, but Taylor’s evidence for these heterodox views is thin. He cites the Blumrosens and Waldstreicher, and three other sources: George William Van Cleve’s *A Slaveholders’ Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early Republic* (2010), Seymour Drescher’s *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (2009), and Christopher Leslie Brown’s *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (2006).

These three books are dubious props for Taylor’s argument. Van Cleve’s comes closest to supporting Taylor’s claim in depicting the restlessness of Virginia planters under British rule, but it does not suggest they acted out of fear that Britain would end slavery in the colony. Rather, says Van Cleve, the planters worried that “diminished imperial protection for slavery” might threaten their “property rights” in other colonies that were less friendly to slavery. They sought “local autonomy” over slavery to stave off this prospect – which would definitely not explain the willingness of Virginia or the other southern colonies to join with the northern colonies where the abolitionist movement had already made major gains. The Revolution, in Van Cleve’s view, far from protecting slavery, “posed a series of important additional threats to slavery.”²¹

Drescher recounts how “Parliament recoiled at the suggestion” of William Lyttelton in October 1775 that the British should foment slave rebellions in the southern colonies. He also cites Edmund Burke’s scorn for Dunmore’s tactic of inviting American slaves to desert their masters.²² He reports nothing that would give a foundation to a fear by Americans that the British were contemplating an end to American slavery, and he reports no instances of such fears on the part of Americans.

Brown shows at length and in detail that the British antislavery movement began *after* the American Revolution, concluding: “The British antislavery movement that began in the late 1780s was, therefore, a late-born sibling in the family of Anglo-American antislavery campaigns.”²³

But Taylor paints a different picture. “When confronted by any sign of slave discontent,” he writes, “Virginians anticipated a ripening into bloody rebellion.” He says the slaveholding Virginians of the pre-revolutionary era lived in terror of a slave uprising, and almost any British action could be peered at through that lens. Virginia was eager to stop further imports of slaves because it already had a large surplus. The British government, however, blocked that effort, and Virginians, including Jefferson, saw this as further destabilizing an already perilous situation. Taylor argues that Virginia’s peculiar concerns were an ingredient in the American Revolution comparable to the events in Massachusetts: “The traditional history of the American Revolution emphasizes the role of Massachusetts in resisting British taxes, but Virginia proved equally important to the Patriot coalition.”²⁴ Taylor is a serious historian whose words have to be considered carefully, particularly when his thinking runs counter to what other historians have said; but on this matter his sourcing for his claims falls far short of supporting them.

There are three main problems with Taylor’s argument. First, the authorities he cites say little that backs up his contention that the *Somerset* decision “caused a sensation” in Virginia. There is some speculation in some of his cited sources, but no evidence, and Taylor himself cites none. He tells us that “colonial masters felt shocked by the implication that their property system defied English traditions of liberty,” but we don’t see or hear from any

of these shocked slaveholders, let alone see them translating that shock into taking up arms against England. The only contemporary who is named is an Englishman named Ambrose Serle, who mocks the slaveholders as hating "absolute rule" by others when they "ardently pursue it for themselves."²⁵ Serle was a senior clerk who worked in the British department of the secretary of state, had traveled in America, and wrote a tract titled *Americans against Liberty*, in which he upheld the virtues of the enlightened English over the backward Americans. Quoted by Brown, who devotes several pages to the pompous clerk, Serle emerges not as an advocate of abolition but as a champion of British imperial rule.

Strong heterodox claims require strong evidence – or at least *some* evidence, and Taylor appears to come up empty on this point. He is much more convincing about white Virginians' fear of slave revolts, and, as the Revolution got underway, the British adroitly exploited this fear. Perhaps at that point some Virginians remembered the *Somerset* decision, but it would be good to see actual evidence of that too.

Second, there is the general issue of how Virginia participated in the events leading up to the Revolution. The record is clear that the public debates in Virginia over British control were dominated by other matters and by men whose interests were broader than possible British emancipation of slaves. George Washington opposed British colonial policies from at least 1754, when he was passed over for promotion to the status of a British officer after his service in the French and Indian War. Washington realized then that Americans, no matter their accomplishments, would never be treated by the British as equals. The principle of equality mattered deeply to him. After his election to Virginia's House of Burgesses

in 1759 – long before the *Somerset* decision – Washington expressed the displeasure of Virginia planters over Britain's limits on westward expansion. Virginia's unhappiness with British rule soon took the shape of seeking alliances with the other colonies. In May 1774, Virginia proposed a congress of all the colonies, and Virginia's Peyton Randolph was elected president of the first Continental Congress, to which Washington was a delegate. Washington was named commander in chief of the Continental Army on June 19, 1775. None of this would have been possible if the northern colonies had seen Virginia as driven by a panic at the prospect of losing its slaves.

Third, historians other than Taylor see no such panic. As Gordon Wood observes, Dunmore's Proclamation "may have tipped the scales for some hesitant Virginia planters, but by then the revolutionary movement was already well along in Virginia." And: "Perhaps some southern slaveholders were alarmed by news of the *Somerset* decision, but we don't have any evidence of that." Moreover, says Wood:

*There is no evidence in 1776 of a rising movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, as the 1619 Project erroneously asserts, nor is there any evidence the British government was eager to do so. But even if either were the case, ending the Atlantic slave trade would have been welcomed by the Virginia planters, who already had more slaves than they needed. Indeed, the Virginians in the years following independence took the lead in moving to abolish the despicable international slave trade.*²⁶

Sean Wilentz disputes the point even more vigorously, taking Taylor's word, "sensation," and throwing it back at the supporters of this view:

In fact, the Somerset ruling caused no such sensation. In the entire slaveholding South, a total of six newspapers – one in Maryland, two in Virginia, and three in South Carolina – published only 15 reports about Somerset, virtually all of them very brief. Coverage was spotty: The two South Carolina newspapers that devoted the most space to the case didn't even report its outcome. American newspaper readers learned far more about the doings of the queen of Denmark, George III's sister Caroline, whom Danish rebels had charged with having an affair with the court physician and plotting the death of her husband. A pair of Boston newspapers gave the Somerset decision prominent play; otherwise, most of the coverage appeared in the tiny-font foreign dispatches placed on the second or third page of a four- or six-page issue.

Above all, Wilentz continues,

the reportage was almost entirely matter-of-fact, betraying no fear of incipient tyranny. A London correspondent for one New York newspaper did predict, months in advance of the actual ruling, that the case "will occasion a greater ferment in America (particularly in the islands) than the Stamp Act," but that forecast fell flat. Some recent studies have conjectured that the Somerset ruling must have intensely riled southern slaveholders, and word of the decision may well have encouraged enslaved Virginians about the prospects of their gaining freedom, which could have added to slaveholders' constant fears of insurrection. Actual evidence, however, that the Somerset decision jolted the slaveholders into fearing an abolitionist Britain – let alone to the extent that it can be considered a leading impetus to declaring independence – is less than scant.

Wilentz has more to say on this than I can conveniently quote. He allows that Dunmore's Proclamation, after the

war had started, "likely stiffened the resolve for independence among the rebel patriots whom Dunmore singled out, but they were already rebels." Plainly, it "cannot be held up as evidence that the slaveholder colonists wanted to separate from Britain to protect the institution of slavery."²⁷

The evidence adduced by Van Cleve, in *A Slaveholders' Union*, simply does not line up with Taylor's generalizations. Van Cleve provides one of the richest and most detailed accounts of colonial debates about slavery in this era, including reactions to the *Somerset* decision. He observes that twenty-two of twenty-four surviving colonial newspapers "contained reports of the [*Somerset*] arguments, an account of the decision, or both." An anonymous South Carolinian circulated a pamphlet citing *Somerset* as a reason why the delegate to the First Continental Congress should not, as Van Cleve puts it, "adopt all English liberties." Henry Marchant, a Rhode Island official who as an attorney represented a slaveholder's interests, inveighed against *Somerset* in his private diary as providing a "'plausible pretense'" to "cheat an honest American of his slave."²⁸

Having scoured the record, Van Cleve finds that "American slaveholders reacted to *Somerset* either with criticism or with public silence," which is to say *not* with determination to overthrow British authority in order to preserve slavery. Apropos of silence, Van Cleve cites the correspondence of Peleg Clarke, a Newport, Rhode Island, slave-ship captain who in the aftermath of the *Somerset* decision never mentions it. Van Cleve writes, "Clarke and his correspondents in England and the West Indies believed that African slave prices and American molasses prices then had the largest impact on the trade."²⁹ The *Somerset* decision didn't even warrant a shrug from this slave trader.

I cannot reconcile Wilentz's count of the number of newspapers (six) that reported on *Somerset* with Van Cleve's count (22), except that Van Cleve included northern newspapers. But these are the sorts of details that historians have to hash out. Disagreement among historians, all of them expert on the period and the topic, is normal. It doesn't mean the truth is unattainable. Disagreements lead the way to close, and closer, examination of possible sources and the winnowing out of misleading impressions and premature or mistaken conclusions.

On the most generous interpretation, what the 1619 Project has done is pick sides in a scholarly dispute initially without citing sources and then consistently without acknowledging that the experts have sharply different views. After months of standing pat behind the *Times*' original declaration that America launched the revolution in order to preserve slavery, Jake Silverstein began back-filling the holes in the 1619 argument with the names of historians who supposedly upheld Hannah-Jones's thesis – but even then, it appears that no one at the *Times* took the trouble to examine these sources closely, or even cursorily.

Historians argue among themselves by digging deeper and deeper into archives in search of decisive evidence. The *Times*, by contrast – at least in this case – attempted to settle such a dispute by fiat. That is not the legitimate role of a newspaper. The balance of evidence at this point favors the standard interpretation of the causes of the American Revolution, in which the fear that the British would abolish slavery in the American colonies played no part at all.

I began the previous chapter by observing that criticisms of the 1619 Project seem as futile as moths beating their wings against a porchlight. But a porchlight left on till morning seems rather dim in daylight.

The focus of this chapter is the 1619 Project's assertion that the American Revolution came about because the colonists were eager to perpetuate slavery and feared that the British would take it away. Some historians credit this idea: Waldstreicher, the Blumrosens, Lepore (perhaps), and Taylor among them. But many of the most prominent historians do not. The weight of expert opinion testifies against the *Times*.

Recognizing this, the *Times* magazine's editor in chief has gone from merely brushing aside the strictures of the nation's leading historians to attempting to rescue Hannah-Jones's idea by diluting it. Having replied to the letter from five historians, including Sean Wilentz and Gordon Wood, with a fairly lengthy if evasive answer, Silverstein took a different tack when a follow-up letter from twelve more major historians criticized the project's claim: this was met with his more abrupt determination that "no corrections are warranted."³⁰ (Note that the *Times* magazine declined to print the twelve historians' letter, though Silverstein did reply to it.) But immediately following Leslie Harris's revelation that the *Times* had ignored her when she clearly told its fact-checker in advance of the project's publication that Hannah-Jones's thesis is false, then – and only then – did Silverstein feel moved to make a correction.

Is public shaming the only force strong enough to overcome the *Times*' inertia? Can we make up any story

Chapter Five

we want, regardless of the evidence, and declare that we are just “reframing” history?

It suits the agenda of the 1619 Project to make all of American history a story about slavery. The American Revolution, as one of the major events that had very little to do with the institution of slavery, appears to stand in the way of that agenda. The way to solve this problem, hit upon by Hannah-Jones, was to impose a radical new interpretation on the Revolution that made it centrally about slavery after all. It is clear that this interpretation – even if Alan Taylor’s reading of the situation in Virginia were to stand up to the skepticism of his colleagues – rests on “less than scant” (to borrow Wilentz’s phrase) historical evidence. Hannah-Jones’s ideological zeal outran her fidelity to the truth.

The *Times* pushed ahead with this fable with the assistance of the Pulitzer Center, thousands of eagerly supportive schoolteachers, and a contingent of academic historians who may know the story is false but who see the larger cause of pursuing racial justice as overriding the need for historical accuracy – and still others who fear being labeled “racist” if they speak out.

Still, let’s trust that day will eventually dawn and spoil the magical illusions of the porchlight. At some point, perhaps years from now, real history will be as plain as day. Until then, we have the 1619 Project.

CHAPTER SIX

MARCH 2020

IN MID-MARCH 2020, as I worked on this book, I had a stack of 138 articles that had been published to that point either supporting or criticizing the 1619 Project. I was surely missing some, but not many. As a rough measure of public influence, 138 responses strikes me as a low number. Even a minor adjustment in immigration rules or a tweak to the tax codes elicits many times that number of articles in a single week. But a friend of mine who works on cultural issues views the size of the response as a triumph. For criticism of a major move by the cultural left, he said to me, “this is as good as it gets.”

In chapter 3, I characterized the 1619 Project as a media event and traced the way the *New York Times* staged it. In this chapter I describe – briefly – the project’s opponents, and somewhat more fully the forces allied to or sympathetic with the 1619 Project. To understand how the controversy plays out, we need a *dramatis personae*. As anyone who goes to the theater knows, the list of characters in the program is awfully handy to have.

THE OPPOSITION

As part of my work for the National Association of Scholars, I speak to groups of people around the country