

The Jamestown Paradox: Birthplace of American Freedom and American Slavery

In August 1619, two milestone events happened in Jamestown, the first permanent colony in English North America. The first event, concluding on August 4, was the first meeting of a representative governing body in English North America. For many people, including millions of visiting tourists, Jamestown is the birthplace of American democracy. This familiar story obscures a lesser known, but equally significant event in late August 1619: the arrival of “20 and odd Negroes” to the colony. They would be the first blacks in English North America. They came from West-Central Africa and endured a harrowing Middle Passage across the sea. Their arrival at Point Comfort (present-day Hampton) and their eventual incorporation into the Jamestown colony also marked the beginning of 246 years of racial slavery. Paradoxically then, Jamestown became the birthplace of English-derived democracy and freedom *and* the birthplace of American slavery and racism. The 1619 Africans would be the first of over half million enslaved Africans to arrive in what became the United States. By 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War, the United States would have four million enslaved people, making it the largest slave society in world history.

Were these Africans free or enslaved in Virginia? Some scholars have argued that the 1619 Africans were not enslaved. They note that there were no Virginia slave statutes until the 1660s and that early colonial documents do not use the term “slave.” These scholars also point to some Africans like Anthony and Mary Johnson that eventually became free people with extensive landholdings. Despite a few exceptional cases like the Johnson’s, slavery was the reality for the 1619 Africans. Enslaved in Africa and during the Middle Passage, Jamestown colonist John Rolfe’s account confirms that Jamestown settlers *bought* the Africans from the ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*. In 1625, the Virginia General Court ruled that a black man named “Brase,” passing through the colony en route to England, was instead to be the enslaved property of Governor Francis Wyatt. In his 1627 will, former Governor George Yeardley included “negars” as part of his estate to be passed on to his wife and children. In 1653, Yeardley’s children still claimed ownership over two of these enslaved people, and sold two of their children.

Unlike white indentured servants, who were contractually bound to provide labor for several years, black indentured servants could be permanently enslaved. For example, in 1640, three presumably indentured men, two white and one black, ran away from their indenture. Captured and subsequently punished for their transgression, all three men received a sentence of forty lashes. But the two whites only received an additional year of indenture, while the black, John Punch received the sentence of *lifetime servitude*. When a 1662 Virginia statute declared that the offspring of enslaved mothers inherited their mother's servitude, codifying hereditary racial slavery, Jamestown set a precedent that would be repeated throughout English North America. In 1667, Virginia statutes also declared separately that Christian baptism did not alter slave status and that masters who killed their enslaved people during punishment could not be convicted of a crime; their property rights overrode any personhood rights of blacks. By the 18th century, Virginia was the largest and most powerful slave colony. It would remain an equally large and powerful slave state until, 246 years after its beginning in Jamestown, the 13th amendment abolished slavery in the United States.

The 1619 Africans arrived in Jamestown just a few weeks after the General Assembly meeting that is hailed as the first representative governing body in the Americas. The subsequent deliberations saw free, propertied white males protecting their expanding political and economic freedoms at the expense of enslaved Africans and Native Americans. These expanding political and economic freedoms also excluded white indentured laborers and convict laborers. American freedom and democracy was dependent on the racialized American slavery. Jamestown was also the beginning of racial slavery in English colonies within the Atlantic World, including Bermuda, Barbados, South Carolina and Jamaica. Indeed, England became the world's leading slave trading nation from 1650 to 1800. Four hundred years after the arrival of the '20 and odd' Negroes, 2019 is an opportunity to remember, reflect and honor those first captive Africans that arrived in Jamestown.

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