

# Classroom Connections: 1619: The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia



## Classroom Connections: The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia

### Background for Teachers

In 1619, the first Africans were brought against their will across the Atlantic Ocean to the Virginia colony. It marked the beginning of the institution of slavery in the United States. Over 400 years later, the United States is still grappling with the legacy of slavery and systemic racism. Generations of African Americans have been subject to untold cruelty. However, it is also true that much of America's current prosperity can be traced back to the contributions of slaves.

This lesson, and the corresponding BackStory episode, provide a retrospective of the origins of the African slave trade in the U.S. The episode raises difficult questions about how we should commemorate the 400-year anniversary of this dark moment in American history. Using modern perspectives, students will form arguments on how to best approach the legacy of slavery in the United States.

## Procedures

1. Guiding Question:
  - a. Ask students to write down an initial response to this question:
    - i. 2019 marked the 400-year anniversary of the first Africans brought to the Virginia colony. How should this event be remembered and commemorated given the legacy of slavery?
  - b. As the lesson progresses, ask students to revisit this question.
2. Classroom Connections: Listen to Backstory
  - a. Have students listen to the Backstory episode on the origins of the slave trade in Virginia. This can be also be assigned before class. Have students focus on the following comprehension questions for each segment:
    - i. History First, First History
      1. Where did the first Africans brought to the Virginia colony originally come from?
      2. What skills and knowledge did Africans bring to the colony?
    - ii. Questioning the 400th
      1. Frank Harris interviewed Americans asking, “How should the 400th be observed, and if you had the chance, what would you say to those first Africans?” What responses did he get to these two questions?
    - iii. First Family
      1. Who was William Tucker?
      2. How has the William Tucker 1624 Society tried to educate others about the contributions of its ancestors?
    - iv. Where it All Began
      1. What is the significance of Point Comfort?
      2. What role does Fort Monroe play in the Civil War?
3. Document Analysis
  - a. Pass out the document set and graphic organizer to students. The documents are modern reflections about the aftermath of Africans first arriving to the United States in 1619.
  - b. Have students review each document individually or in small groups.
  - c. For each document, students should fill out the following information in the graphic organizer:
    - i. Purpose: Why was the document created?
    - ii. Audience: For whom was the document created? How does this impact what it says?
    - iii. Thesis: What is the author’s essential message?
    - iv. Evidence: What evidence is used to support the author’s argument?
  - d. After groups have been given enough time to craft their arguments, participate in a class discussion to summarize key themes and learning points.
4. Return to the Guiding Question
  - a. To conclude the lesson, have students revisit the initial guiding question. Ask students to reflect on how their opinions have shifted based on new information. Encourage students to write down one key takeaway from the lesson.

## Standards

### AP US History Themes:

**Theme 1:** American and National Identity

**Theme 2:** Work, Exchange, and Technology

**Theme 4:** Migration and Settlement

**Theme 5:** Politics and Power

**Theme 7:** America and Regional Culture

**Theme 8:** Social Structures

### C3 Framework:

#### *Change, Continuity, and Context*

**D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts

**D2.His.2.9-12.** Analyze change and continuity in historical eras

**D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

#### *Perspectives*

**D2.His.5.9-12.** Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

**D2.His.7.9-12.** Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

**D2.His.8.9-12.** Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time

#### *Historical Sources and Evidence*

**D2.His.10.9-12.** Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

**D2.His.11.9-12.** Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

**D2.His.12.9-12.** Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

#### *Causation and Argument*

**D2.His.14.9-12.** Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

**D2.His.16.9-12.** Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

**D2.His.17.9-12.** Critique the central arguments in secondary works of history on related topics in multiple media in terms of their historical accuracy.

**Document Analysis: Graphic Organizer**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Thesis</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Perspective A: Nikole Hannah- Jones on Democracy				
Perspective B: Poem by Clint Smith				
Perspective C: Narrative of Wanda Tucker				
Perspective D: Matthew Desmond on Capitalism				



## Classroom Connections: The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia

### Part I: Guiding Question

Consider this question throughout the lesson.

1. 2019 marked the 400-year anniversary of the first Africans brought to the Virginia colony. How should this event be remembered and commemorated given the legacy of slavery?

### Part II: *Backstory - 1619: The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia*

As you listen to the Backstory episode, answer the following questions for each segment.

1. History First, First History
  - a. Where did the first Africans brought to the Virginia colony originally come from?
  - b. What skills and knowledge did Africans bring to the colony?
  
2. Questioning the 400th
  - a. Frank Harris interviewed Americans asking, “How should the 400th be observed, and if you had the chance, what would you say to those first Africans?” What responses did he get to these two questions?
  
3. First Family
  - a. Who was William Tucker?
  - b. How has the William Tucker 1624 Society tried to educate others about the contributions of its ancestors?
  
4. Where it All Began
  - a. What is the significance of Point Comfort?
  - b. What role does Fort Monroe play in the Civil War?

### Part III: Document-Based Question

*Directions:* Using the information from the podcast and the documents below, formulate an argument in response to the following prompt:

- How should Americans commemorate the 400-year anniversary of the first Africans arriving in the Virginia colonies?

In your response you should:

- Craft a thesis statement that takes a stand on the question above
- Structure a response that follows a clear format and uses logical argumentation
- Contextualize your response in your knowledge of US History
- Use at least three of the documents
- Use the graphic organizer to outline your thinking

## Perspective A

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 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. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island “slave trader.” Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” 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. “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.

Article by Nikole Hannah-Jones in *The New York Times Magazine*

“Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

August 14, 2019

## Perspective B

Over the course of 350 years,  
36,000 slave ships crossed the Atlantic  
Ocean. I walk over to the globe & move  
my finger back & forth between  
the fragile continents. I try to keep  
count how many times I drag  
my hand across the bristled  
hemispheres, but grow weary of chasing  
a history that swallowed me.  
For every hundred people who were  
captured & enslaved, forty died before they  
ever reached the New World.  
I pull my index finger from Angola  
to Brazil & feel the bodies jumping from  
the ship.  
I drag my thumb from Ghana  
to Jamaica & feel the weight of dysentery  
make an anvil of my touch.  
I slide my ring finger from Senegal  
to South Carolina & feel the ocean  
separate a million families.  
The soft hum of history spins  
on its tilted axis. A cavalcade of ghost ships  
wash their hands of all they carried.

“August 1619”

A Poem by Clint Smith, 2019

## Perspective C

Wanda would tell everyone she met in Angola she was descended from the first Africans brought to the English colonies. The story was a family treasure, handed down from generation to generation. It's a story that Wanda and others had worked to bolster over the years despite a vacuum of evidence, as records for African Americans from that period barely exist. Their names were lost to burned churches, unmarked graves and to a government that didn't count them as human.

Like any family heirloom, the rough edges have been worn smooth by the passing years, so the story in Wanda's family invokes a deep sense of pride whether it is provable or not.

What's known is that in 1619, two Angolans named Anthony and Isabella, along with 20 or so others, staggered off a ship into Point Comfort in what is now Hampton, Virginia. They'd been taken from the Ndongo kingdom in the interior of Angola and marched to the coast. They'd endured months packed in the bottom of a ship named the San Juan Bautista. When raiders attacked in the Gulf of Mexico, the captives were rerouted to Virginia aboard the White Lion, changing the course of a nation.

Anthony and Isabella probably weren't their real names. Their Angolan names were likely subbed out by whichever Catholic priest baptized them for the journey.

The reason they are remembered and other Africans are not is the anomaly that someone bothered to record their names at all. A 1625 census noted that they belonged to the household of Capt. William Tucker and that they had a child named William. Wanda and her family believe they are descended from William, the first named African born in what would become America. An American forefather most history ignores.

The arrival of the first Africans in the fledgling English colony foreshadowed a prosperity unfathomable without the forced labor of hundreds of thousands who would follow. Chattel slavery launched the longest, ugliest, most shameful period in American history.

It sought to erase the identity and culture of 400,000 people taken from Africa. It left their millions of descendants with a history they can never fully know.

So when Wanda Tucker traveled 7,000 miles to a country no one she knew had ever been, she did so on the faith of her connection to Anthony and Isabella.

But she was also doing it for the millions of African Americans who don't have the name of an ancestor to claim.

When the plane landed, the void she felt was bigger than any one ancestor, any one tribe. It was an entire people missing its past.

Excerpt from *"Hundreds of thousands of Africans were enslaved in America. Wanda Tucker believes her relatives were the first"*

By Deborah Barfield Berry and Kelley Benham French, *USA Today*. September 10, 2019

## Perspective D

Those searching for reasons the American economy is uniquely severe and unbridled have found answers in many places (religion, politics, culture). But recently, historians have pointed persuasively to the gnatty fields of Georgia and Alabama, to the cotton houses and slave auction blocks, as the birthplace of America's low-road approach to capitalism.

Slavery was undeniably a font of phenomenal wealth. By the eve of the Civil War, the Mississippi Valley was home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States. Cotton grown and picked by enslaved workers was the nation's most valuable export. The combined value of enslaved people exceeded that of all the railroads and factories in the nation. New Orleans boasted a denser concentration of banking capital than New York City. What made the cotton economy boom in the United States, and not in all the other far-flung parts of the world with climates and soil suitable to the crop, was our nation's unflinching willingness to use violence on nonwhite people and to exert its will on seemingly endless supplies of land and labor. Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above.

Nearly two average American lifetimes (79 years) have passed since the end of slavery, only two. It is not surprising that we can still feel the looming presence of this institution, which helped turn a poor, fledgling nation into a financial colossus. The surprising bit has to do with the many eerily specific ways slavery can still be felt in our economic life. "American slavery is necessarily imprinted on the DNA of American capitalism," write the historians Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman. The task now, they argue, is "cataloging the dominant and recessive traits" that have been passed down to us, tracing the unsettling and often unrecognized lines of descent by which America's national sin is now being visited upon the third and fourth generations.

Article by Matthew Desmond in *The New York Times Magazine*

"In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation."

August 14, 2019