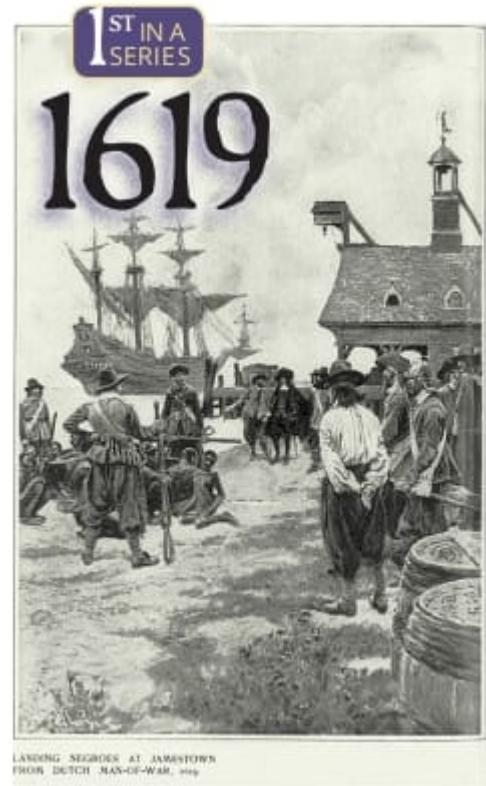


Slavery, Settler Colonialism, Gender Oppression and Resistance in the Early Colonial Years

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This year marks 400 years since “20 and odd” enslaved Africans on board a Dutch frigate were traded for supplies to English settlers at Jamestown.



LANDING SLAVES AT JAMESTOWN
FROM DUTCH MAN-OF-WAR, 1619

As historians have noted, these African captives were not the first to be enslaved in North America. Enslaved Africans had been a part of the labor force that had been coerced to build the Spanish colonies of Mexico and Florida. As well, enslaved Africans accompanied the English settlers of the “vanished” colony of Roanoke, thirty years earlier. Also, there were very likely Africans in Jamestown before 1619 who might have arrived by way of Florida.

Nevertheless, none of these new findings diminish the importance of 1619 to our study of slavery, capitalism and the Black freedom struggle. With the introduction of enslaved Africans, the plantation society of colonial Virginia expanded and the wealth of the American colonies was generated. From this, the primary contradiction in American history was generated.

The enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans over the following 160 years produced the independence of the bourgeois class of American settlers from England — literally. Tobacco farmed by enslaved Africans in Virginia became currency paid to the French for their decisive support of American colonial rebels.

American culture celebrates the formation of the Plymouth Colony as its national origin because it reinforces national mythology: units of Christian families migrated to the United States in search of religious freedom. No such pretenses are in the formation of the Virginia Colony. As historian Annette Gordon-Reed notes, Jamestown is the United States’ Garden of Eden and slavery and white supremacy is the nation’s original sin.

In May 1607, the 104 original settlers arrived in Jamestown. All of them were men and boys contracted as a part of an expedition financed by the Virginia Company of London. With no women, this trek was an economic venture intent on creating an extractive economy. The settlers hoped to find precious minerals, wood and other natural resources that could be sent back to England. As well, they were in search of a Northwest Passage to Asian trade markets. In exchange, they were met with death

and starvation.

The subsequent three years are historically known as the Starving Time. Less than 40 of the original settlers survived until 1608. As many as 500 more settlers arrived, but only 60 were alive by 1610. Mineral extraction had failed and the drought hurt their efforts at sustenance farming. The fate of the colony shifted in 1610 with the arrival of John Rolfe and a shift in the extractive economies.

In 1610, John Rolfe arrived in Virginia. Rolfe, an English merchant, aimed to undercut the Spanish monopoly on the tobacco trade. The tobacco smoked in the American northeast was too strong to be mass produced for the English market.

Introducing a much more popular strand of tobacco to the English and European society, Rolfe cornered the market and made Virginia the center of the tobacco industry. This became the material basis for the development of American society. By 1620, Rolfe was shipping 40,000 pounds of tobacco to England, annually. By 1624, it had become 240,000 annual pounds. By 1680, that metastasized to 25 million pounds per year.

Tobacco became one-fourth of all American colonial exports and 70 percent came from Virginia. In European society, tobacco moved from being an elite luxury to a common practice and a plurality of the global product came from the Chesapeake region.

However, tobacco is a very labor intensive crop. Mass production of tobacco was first made possible through servant and slave labor and subsequently through automation. Very hard on the soil, tobacco also requires frequent crop rotations. The need for more plantation land and cheap or enslaved labor highlights the relationship between settler colonialism and that enslavement which defined the peculiarity of the American political economy in the 17th century.

Commemorating four hundred years of Black freedom struggle in the British North America, this series examines that first century of life in the American colonies. In the construction of a racial capitalist venture, slavery, the histories of African, Native and working people in the American colonies overlapped.

This first decade was a moment of uncertainty which included multiple acts of resistance and solidarity. In this series, we will highlight the struggles of Africans, Native people and indentured servants to forge solidarity and find freedom. These struggles at the rise of American colonialism serve as a lesson of solidarity and resistance in the 21st century.

[Part 2: From the Terrible Transformation to the Creation of the Negro: A Black Socialist Analysis of the First Century of Slavery in North America](#)

