



# It's Been 398 Years since the Arrival of Kidnapped Blacks in America – And Still We Haven't Come to Terms with It

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by James Thornton Harris

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Historic marker at Point Comfort, VA

August 12, 2017 will be remembered for the injuries and death in Charlottesville, a tragic eruption of white racist violence, but just two years from now the state of Virginia will host an even more significant event: the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in the American colonies.

This first group of Africans were recorded by John Rolfe, a local leader (and the widower of Pocahontas), as the arrival of “20 and odd Negroes.”

Historian Bernard Bailyn described the first blacks as a group of men and women captured in Angola and “hijacked from a shipment to Spanish America” and sold at Point Comfort, Virginia for several barrels of fresh water and “victualles.”

The small port on the Chesapeake Bay, next to Hampton, VA is now part of Fort Monroe. A state historical marker at the site notes “They were the first Africans on record to be forcibly settled as involuntary laborers in the North American British Colonies.”

While there is precious little existing written documentation about these first black colonists, the consensus among historians is they were treated as indentured servants, not slaves. Soon after they stepped on shore they were put to work in the colony's tobacco fields alongside white indentured servants. Slavery, as a legal institution, did not yet exist in Virginia. This temporary, indeterminate status allowed a few of the Africans to eventually earn their freedom and own their own tobacco plantations.

The black population in early America increased very slowly at first. During the first half of the 17th century, the burgeoning slave trade on the West African coast was dominated by Portugal, Spain and the Dutch. Only after 1664, was England able to muscle its way into the lucrative trade.

Bailyn records that by 1650 there were only 300 blacks in Maryland and by 1670, only around 2,000 in Virginia (about 2.5% of the colony's population).

While they were not legally slaves, the first blacks in Virginia faced challenges much more difficult than the European colonists. The first Africans had to learn a new language, wear uncomfortable clothes, adjust to a strange diet and a new religion. Unlike the English workers, who at least had the hope of returning to their homeland, the Africans knew they would never see their families or villages again.

As Historian John Hope Franklin wrote, the first generation of blacks in America "forcibly gathered from a wide range of ethnic groups in Africa, gradually formed a new identity that blended their pasts. This process of cultural reformation (produced) a shared African-American cultural and racial identity..."

Bailyn noted that in English common law, "there had been no preexisting legal definition of slavery," so the blacks were treated under the same rules as white indentured servants. Most of these were poor, unemployed young English men, who served from four to six years before earning a "payout," usually 50 acres of land and tools to start a farm.

The entire legal and cultural system of white supremacy and racial segregation familiar to Americans through recent movies like *Twelve Years a Slave* and *Birth of a Nation* would need to be invented. The ruling white establishment in Virginia in the 1600s and early 1700s assembled it, piece by piece, through laws, court decisions and cultural norms. The result, in place well before the American Revolution, was a superstructure of subjugation, humiliation and physical cruelty that would trap black Americans for centuries to come.

Virginia was hardly the only colony to adopt legal slavery. By 1676 it was in force in most northern states, including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey.

But what about white racism?

We know that in the first decades, black workers lived and ate alongside white workers. They also had sex together and produced the first biracial children, which required a new set of court rulings (the child would be slave or free depending on the status of the mother).

The attitudes of white colonists to their dark-skinned neighbors probably differed according to their class backgrounds. The wealthy landowners, used to bossing around (and on occasion whipping) white

indentured servants, probably looked down upon the African workers as social and cultural inferiors. The blacks spoke little English, they had arrived in chains and, of course, they looked dramatically different. At a time when many Europeans attributed fair skin to purity and virtue, the Africans had black skin and tight curly hair.

One mitigating factor for the plantation owners was the strength and endurance of the African workers. They appeared resistant to many of the diseases that felled white workers in the lowlands of Virginia. In addition, many of the Africans were skilled agricultural workers, having tended row crops in their homeland. It is highly likely they contributed to new techniques in raising tobacco, rice and indigo, the primary plantation crops.

Very few of the landowners or white servants had seen Africans before, although most had heard about them. In the early 17th century, there were only a thousand or so Africans in England, most working as indentured servants in London. Some of the colonists may have seen black men working on the London docks as they boarded their ship for Virginia.

As the blacks and whites worked together in the fields, many must have realized how much they had a lot in common. Both groups were both working without pay, under grueling conditions. Day after day, they bent over the finicky green tobacco plants, hoeing, weeding and plucking, often in sweltering heat. If a field hand, black or white, appeared to slacken his pace, he could be whipped or beaten by a white overseer.

Within a few years, blacks and whites were plotting to runaway together, rarely successfully. These joint acts of resistance prompted the white landowners to separate black workers in their own quarters on the plantations. This would eventually morph into the complete racial segregation enforced in the Southern states before (and after) the Civil War.

We can only hope that the upcoming 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in August 2019 will be a time for reflection. A comparable event, the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first English settlers at Jamestown, drew President George W. Bush on May 13, 2007.

In his remarks at Jamestown, President Bush said the event should “honor the beginnings of our democracy” and provide “a chance to renew our commitment to help others around the world realize the great blessings of liberty.”

The president added, "The advance of freedom is the great story of our time, and new chapters are being written every day," and named Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq as examples.

Given that Donald Trump is likely to be President in 2019, it is difficult to imagine what he would say in terms of marking the occasion. During his election campaign, he famously addressed black voters by asking “What have you got to lose?”

The proposed ceremonies at Point Comfort in 2019 might give him a chance to reflect on the realities of the black experience in Americans during 400 years of living in America.