

# 400th Anniversary of First Slaves Brought to Continental English Colonies in the Americas Observed

*The Wired Word* for the Week of September 1, 2019

## In the News

August marked 400 years since the first enslaved Africans were brought to British North America -- what became the United States. According to records from the time, in late August 1619, "20 and odd Negroes" arrived in Point Comfort in what is now Hampton, Virginia, on the British ship *White Lion*, where they were sold to settlers.

Though some people consider that event the beginning of slavery in America, the landing was, as far as we know, the first in a *British* colony in what became the United States. But it was far from the beginning of slavery -- nor even of chattel slavery of Africans -- in the future United States. The Spanish had brought African slaves to their colonies in South Carolina through Florida and the Gulf Coast as well as up into New Mexico and the American southwest from their New Spain (now Mexico) colonies. Slavery was also widely practiced by the peoples living in all the Americas for centuries before Europeans landed. Nor was this unusual; slavery was part of the background in almost every corner of the globe.

"Chattel" slavery is so named because under it, people are treated as the chattel (personal property) of the owner and are bought and sold as commodities. America's chattel slave system, like those of most places where it was practiced, imposed slave status on children of the enslaved at birth.

It wasn't until the 18th century that slavery began to be challenged in Western civilization. Slavery was abolished in England and most of the northern American states by mid-19th century, International slave trade was criminalized about that time in the United States, and the British Royal Navy stationed a squadron of ships off of western Africa to suppress the slave trade. In 1865, after a war that killed more than two percent of the population, slavery was banned in all of the United States.

Slavery continued through much of the rest of the world. It wasn't until 2007, for example, that Mauritania banned the ownership of slaves. Slave markets still operate in several areas of the world, the most well known being in Mauritania and Libya. (This past November, the United States imposed trade sanctions on Mauritania for its continued toleration of slavery.)

Anniversary observances were held in that same Virginia port last weekend, with thousands of people in attendance to both acknowledge the sin of chattel slavery and honor the African descendants who survived its brutality and helped build America.

The observances were organized by the Hampton 2019 Commemorative Commission. Attendees saw the historic marker where the English ship *White Lion* arrived and were invited to experience what shackles felt like. Some prayed for the enslaved Africans on that ship and for those who did not survive the voyage.

Sunday, the last day of the program, was designated as "Healing Day," with a bell ringing continuously for four minutes -- one minute for each century of African American history and culture. The act was meant to capture a spirit of healing and reconciliation.

The African men, women and children on the *White Lion* had originally been acquired by Portuguese forces probably from the kingdom of Kongo (in what is today Angola), either in battle or in trade, for sale into slavery in Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Central and South America. About 350 Africans were jammed onto the Portuguese ship *San Juan Bautista*, but as the ship sailed toward the new world, sickness broke out aboard the vessel and about 150 died.

En route, the *San Juan Bautista* was attacked by two privateer British ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*. As part of their booty, the pirates took about 50 of the Africans, split between the two British ships. The *White Lion* arrived in Virginia first and sold its human cargo and a few days later, the *Treasurer* arrived and sold off two or three more slaves. (The *Treasurer* may have taken the rest of its slaves to Bermuda.) The *San Juan Bautista* continued to Veracruz, where 147 surviving enslaved Africans were sold.

Slaveholding was formalized into Virginia law by the early 1650s, declaring that the children of the enslaved women automatically inherited their mother's status and were enslaved at birth, regardless of the father's identity. Other English colonies followed this practice, which continued after U.S. independence. The slave trade was increasingly restricted over time, beginning during the Articles of Confederation, and continuing in the United States. States began to abolish slavery, beginning in the northeast. By 1821, half of the states were "free" while half allowed slavery. By 1861, well over half of the states -- and most of the territories -- were "free." In 1865, Congress and the states ended slavery in the United States by passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

Some historians say that slavery laid the foundation of American wealth through the cotton industry and was a significant part of the U.S. economy in the slave states. In addition, slaves were part of the construction crews for many public buildings, including the White House and the United States Capitol.

Some call slavery America's original sin, which used and abused generations of black people and set the stage for ongoing inequality even after slavery as an institution was ended. This has been shown variously as Jim Crow laws, housing discrimination, schemes to deny black people the right to vote and other measures. Abraham Lincoln in an 1858 speech once called it "same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it." That attitude was not unique to America, but unique to being human.

*Newsweek* columnist Lee Habeeb commented that "the words written by Thomas Jefferson didn't just change America. The assertion that human beings were endowed with unalienable rights by their Creator echoed around the world, and still does wherever people are fighting for -- longing for -- their God-given freedoms."

But Habeeb adds, "Our nation's tragedy -- our deep moral chasm -- was that we did not include black people in that compact."

Speaking at the observance, Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said the "dualism [of] high-minded principle and indescribable cruelty has defined us. The transatlantic slave trade was one of the most cruel atrocities. And yet how fortunate we are as a country that the descendants of that cruel institution are part of our country."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Thousands of People Gather to Commemorate 400 Years Since American Slavery Began. *CNN*  
Slavery In America Did Not Begin In 1619. *The Federalist*  
Virginia Marks the Dawn of American Slavery in 1619 With Solemn Speeches and Songs. *The Washington Post*  
The Founding Fathers and Slavery. *Encyclopedia Britannica*  
400 Years Ago, Enslaved Africans First Arrived in Virginia. *National Geographic*  
Virginia's First Africans. *Encyclopedia Virginia*  
A Symbol of Slavery -- and Survival. *The Washington Post*  
How Slavery Became America's First Big Business. *Vox*

### **Applying the News Story**

If your ancestors arrived in this land as slaves, it may feel validating to have the suffering of your forebears and the vestiges of unequal treatment acknowledged in the observances of the 1619 anniversary.

If your ancestors arrived in this land as free persons, acknowledgement of the 1619 anniversary provides a way to let descendants of slaves know that you are not ignorant of their experience, particularly of suffering and injustice that ensued for many in the years since. Reviewing the history and roots of slavery in America is a means to recognize the centuries of suffering endured by slaves and their descendants in this country.

### **The Big Questions**

1. What does the 1619 commemoration mean to you? Why or why not *should* it mean something to you?
2. What new information, if any, have you learned about slavery from the news about the 400th anniversary observance?
3. What, if anything, does the news about the observance make you feel? Why? Is there anything about the observance that inclines you to look upon people as individuals rather than as embodiments of racial differences?
4. To the degree that you know your family's history, in what ways did slavery affect your ancestors?
5. Why do you think the biblical authors never challenged the institution of slavery?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Genesis 15:13-14**

*Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. (For context, read 15:1-15.)*

During the time when God was making a covenant with Abram (Abraham), God told Abram that his offspring would be enslaved for 400 years (referring to their sojourn in Egypt) but that they would eventually "come out" (referring to the Exodus). The enslavement of the Hebrews was part of the reason that African slaves in America identified with the ancient Hebrews.

The coming out with "great possessions" refers to Exodus 12:35-36, where, as the Israelites were departing Egypt, the Egyptians gave them gold and silver jewelry and clothing. Exodus 3:22 and 11:2-3 tell more about the Egyptians giving jewelry and clothing to the departing Israelites, and indicate that the Egyptians did so because God brought the slaves into favor with the Egyptians.

**Questions:** Might the "favor" of the Egyptians toward the Israelites have been empathy for the plight of the slaves? Might it have been guilt because of profiting from their labor? What else might explain it?

**Genesis 16:13-15**

*So [Hagar] named the LORD who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. (For context, read 16:1-15.)*

Hagar was an Egyptian slave-girl serving the family of Abraham. When her mistress, Sarah, bore no children, Sarah urged Abraham to father a child with Hagar, which he did. This was a relationship in which Hagar had no choice, but after she became pregnant, she got haughty about it. In response, Sarah dealt so harshly with her that Hagar ran away into the wilderness. There, beside an old well, God came to Hagar, promised that she would give birth to a son who would be the father of a nation, and told her to return to Sarah.

Hagar took great comfort in the fact that God saw her where she was. We know this because she responded by calling God *El-roi*, which means "God who sees." What a relief it must have been to her terror-stricken mind to realize that even where she was, a pregnant woman alone in a wild place, she was not out of the sight of God. Later, the well where this encounter between God and Hagar took place came to be known as *Beerlahairoi*, which means "the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me."

A common statement nowadays to let someone know that you are not ignoring or ignorant of their experience, particularly suffering, is "I see you." This 400-year commemoration was a way for people who are not descended from slaves, to say "I see you" to those who are. It is also an opportunity for people descended from slaves to say "I see you" to people today who should not be ascribed guilt for their ancestors' failings. In both cases, it might allow us to see others *today* not in terms of their purported ancestors -- each of which, slave, free or otherwise, have fallen short of God's intentions -- and need his forgiveness.

**Questions:** When have you been able to say "I see you" in some way to acknowledge someone's difficulties? When has someone said the same to you, and how did you feel about it?

**Ephesians 6:5**

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ ... (For context, read 6:5-9.)*

**Luke 12:47**

*That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. (For context, read 12:35-48.)*

Those who were enslaved often heard Bible texts such as these expounded to them by white preachers, and it's obvious why.

Preacher and writer Howard Thurman (1900–1981), was a grandson of slaves. He described the attitude his grandmother held toward texts such as these after being freed. Born in slavery, she

lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida, and she never learned to read or write. "Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her," Thurman said.

"I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of scripture," Thurman said. "For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never -- except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything."

When he was older, Thurman did ask his grandmother why it was that she had not allowed him to read any of the Pauline letters to her. "What she told me I shall never forget," he said.

"During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible." (From Thurman's 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30-31.)

Some slave owners who were Christians viewed their plantation as a mission field and sought to show concern for the eternal salvation of their slaves. But that hid certain ironies (enumerated here by preacher James Earl Massey in *The New Interpreter's Bible*): "1) The very act of teaching slaves argued the case for their capacity for learning and nurture; 2) every conversion among the slaves argued for a relationship between master and slave as fellow Christians, begging the question of the rightness of holding a fellow believer in slavery; and 3) the use of the Bible, the master's sacred book, as the prime instrument of authority in religious instruction continually fed the slaves' interest in becoming literate in order to read on their own. Legal restrictions were instituted and maintained in slave-holding states to help slave masters handle some of the complexities and risks inherent in such an ironic situation, but despite legal barriers, brutal sanctions, and grim threats designed to intimidate and control slaves, many learned to read and secretly shared their skills with other slaves."

**Questions:** What might have helped slaves to view the exposition of such verses as manipulation of scripture to control them? How should verses such as these be read today?

### **Ezra 10:10-11**

*Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." (For context, read 10:9-14, 44.)*

After the Jews returned to their homeland after the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah led an important rebuilding and revival of faith. The walls were rebuilt, thanks to Nehemiah, and he made sure that everyone had a stake in the rebuilding and could point to their part. Ezra read and translated the scriptures so people understood them and claimed them.

But the two were also responsible for expelling foreign wives and children of some of the Jewish men -- women and children who were not accused of doing anything wrong, possibly in response to the fact that people in neighboring towns kept their markets open on the Sabbath. It's a sad

event with no parallel elsewhere in scripture. (In fact, in the New Testament, Paul advised believers in Christ to *remain with* their unbelieving spouses [1 Corinthians 7:12-13].)

It is perhaps somewhat paralleled in the great promise of our nation in establishing a measure of democracy -- voting restricted to white male landowners -- while building on a foundation of slavery and not repudiating it on the founding of our nation. Early drafts of the Declaration of Independence condemned slavery and the topic was hotly debated, but it had to be removed in order for the document to be passed by all of the states.

**Questions:** What are the benefits of owning up to our national failures? Should our nation's founders have not compromised on slavery even if it meant that they would not be able to declare independence with all states? What do you think would have been the result? How do you know when to compromise even if you know that if you do, it might allow something undesirable to continue, but if you don't you might not get anything?