

[Sarah McConnell:](#) A few years ago, a British TV show called Jamestown made its way to US audiences, and the story was probably pretty familiar to most Americans.

[Jamestown promo:](#) "We are building a new world. Jamestown's a hive of men starved of women."

[Sarah McConnell:](#) The show follows three women who came to the Jamestown colony in 1619. They were part of a group of more than 100 British women who were brought over to marry the colonists.

[Jamestown promo:](#) "I'm grateful that we're the ones to come to this new world."

[Sarah McConnell:](#) But the focus on 1619 as the year when women first arrived in Jamestown misses the mark.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Completely ignoring the fact that there were already women here in the colony and, of course, there were women on this continent. Native American women.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) And, of course, 1619 is also the year the first recorded Africans arrived in Jamestown, enslaved. But that doesn't appear in the show's trailer either.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today we take a look at the 400th anniversary of 1619. How should we remember such an important year in American history?

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Cassandra Newby-Alexander has focused on that question of how to commemorate 1619 for years. She's a professor of history and Director of the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Center for African Diaspora Studies at Norfolk State University, where she organizes an annual conference on 1619.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Cassandra, can we start by talking about what exactly happened in 1619? What do we teach children in the textbooks?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Unfortunately, we teach a very stereotypic version, and that is that it was a red-letter year. Meaning that "Oh, how wonderful! We had African slaves arrive." Some textbooks describe them as "servants." We had women arrive, completely ignoring the fact that there were already women here in the colony and, of course, there were women on this continent. Native American women.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) But there weren't lots of women from England to be brides of these laboring European first colonists?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) That's true. And so, supposedly, this group of women who were coming in were supposed to help define the colony culturally, but also ensure that the colony expand and survive. What's interesting about the group of English women who arrived is that many of them never married. And so it tells you a lot about the types of people who would come, but then at the same time, those particular people who came were unwilling to fit into a traditional mode.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) So they're asking people to move to another continent altogether, to travel across the Atlantic Ocean, but then wanting them to come in and fit into a traditional role, and many of them refused to do so.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Was that shipment of women supposed to be sort of mail-order brides?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Yes, absolutely. And the women, many of them actually had a very different agenda. Some of them absolutely refused to marry. Many of them, if they survived, became landholders.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) So, the colonists first arrived in Jamestown in 1607. Did the colonists intermingle with women of Native Americans?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) There was quite a bit of intermingling. In fact, some of the gentry actually encouraged the intermingling. They wanted to use that as a way of gaining access to land. So if they married a Native woman, that was their way of claiming that, as the husband, I now own everything that she is supposed to have. Of course, what we really are seeing is a clash of cultures, because native people did not see private ownership at all when it came to land, and so individuals did not have that particular power. But the English then subsumed their cultural understanding on Native peoples and began to sort of lay out justifications for taking over land.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Now that is not to say there were not some individuals who may have actually had a loving relationship, but certainly, the motivation was clearly articulated in the records as to why they were encouraging European men to marry.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) So tell me about the arrival of the first Africans. This was not deliberate, this was almost by happenstance, right?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Exactly. You know, the Portuguese ship was off the coast of Vera Cruz in Mexico. It was attacked by these privateers. They took everything off the ship, including enslaved people. There were about 40, and there were two English privateer ships, the White Lion and the Treasurer. Those two ships left from Vera Cruz and headed towards the American continent. It's there that they stopped at Point Comfort, which was part of the Jamestown colony, and it was there that they traded provisions for these enslaved people who were aboard their ship.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) About a week later the Treasurer arrived, but by then things changed, and the Treasurer was sent away and ended up going to Bermuda and would later return with an additional 20 people by 1620.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) What do you think their lives were like, those first 20 or so Africans who landed on Virginia shores? Were they slaves? Were they seen as slaves coming into a harsh system? Were they workers who could later be freed?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) The early Africans came from the region of Angola. It is believed that they were all prisoners of war. So their lives were unsettled from the time they were captured until the time they were brought to Virginia. So they had known freedom, and suddenly they were not only prisoners of war, but they found themselves to be enslaved in a system here in Virginia that had no form, no shape. There was no law that really established a system of slavery, and so they tried to make their lives as best they could. And what's interesting is they knew European law. They knew how to sue for their freedom; they knew what their rights were in terms of, many of them were already Christians. So it was a very unsettled time period where these people were trying to find some way to regain their freedom using the system that the English had in place.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Who were they working for in Virginia?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) They were given or sold to the most prominent people.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Do we know what became of any of them?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) We only know a little bit. We don't know how long any of them lived. We don't know when they died. We know some of the places where they were held, but that's where the hope comes in that new archeological research will actually be directed towards recovering some of this history.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Has there been any conversation about creating a memorial to these individuals?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Yes, in fact, an organization called Project 1619, led by Calvin Pearson, has been working for years trying to establish a memorial at Fort Monroe as a remembrance, so that people can come and learn a little bit about this story as well as pay homage to the lives of these individuals who were the first Africans in America, meaning in the United, what would become the United States.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) You are part of the commission that is commemorating this 400 year anniversary of the arrival of these Africans, also the arrival of women and the establishment of really the first democratic body in the Western hemisphere. But you've also said this is tricky, because when you commemorate the arrival of women, the arrival of Africans, this view of history makes it seem as though the others are really outsiders coming into an established world.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) That is absolutely true, and so one of the things that all of the entities are doing is trying to change the way that we view this narrative. Remember, we also are fighting against a narrative that says that the first colony was Plymouth, which didn't get founded until 1620. And that was something that was popularized starting in the 1830s and is a part of a lot of textbooks throughout the country.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) So what we're trying to do is say, "Beginning in 1619." That was really when the American nation and culture begin to evolve. And there are so many different

entities who are a part of that. Some of them unwilling, some of them willing. Some of them were attacked because this was also the beginning of the wars with the Powhatan Confederation at that time period, and we're trying to look at that, change the way we approach the whole storyline so that we have a better, fuller understanding of what really 1619 meant to our nation and to this real founding.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Some people argue we should be celebrating how far we've come, instead of focusing on what's left to be done. What do you think?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) I think that you can't do one without the other. I think that there is an acknowledgment that America has evolved. But you can't say, "We've evolved, therefore let's celebrate," because that suggests that your work is done. I liken it to the first time an African-American was allowed to enter the University of Virginia as a student. One person really does not integrate an entity. You have the beginnings of integration, but you can't start celebrating because one person now is there. You have to continue that process and make sure it's just part of the natural course of people being selected based on their talents and abilities.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Has much changed, do you think, in your lifetime for how this is presented in history books and public discourse?

[Cassandra Newby:](#) I think that, rather than changing the narrative, often it's skirted over. And part of that is that you have a movement in which people have been talking about the people who founded this country, and that whole history, in a celebratory manner. They have argued that if you talk about the negative things, somehow that offsets or completely ignores the more positive things that have happened. And so, instead of doing that, they don't talk about it at all. I think that is a very wrong approach. I think that in order to get people really interested and engaged in history, we have to tell the truth. And the truth is interesting, it is exciting, it is horrific, but it is part of our past. And there are many people still suffering from the actions that were taken 400 years ago. So it's critical that we take a very hard look at who we really are as Americans, and how we got to where we are so that this new century can set a different path.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) We're having a major 1619 Making of America summit, in which we're gonna be grappling with all of these issues that we just finished talking about, having to do with the narrative. Re-imagining the narrative of America, and bringing in national scholars to actually talk about what's happening and discussing those issues in a way that will result in some positive change.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) We want to be there.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Thank you.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Cassandra Newby-Alexander, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

[Cassandra Newby:](#) Thank you so much.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Cassandra Newby-Alexander is a professor of history and Director of the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Center for African Diaspora Studies at Norfolk State University.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) To get the story of 1619 right, we've got to talk about the economics of early America. Richard Chew is an economic historian at Virginia State University. He says North American slavery was really a way for the British king at the time to solve his political problems back home.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Richard, tell us what the economy of Virginia looked like before 1619 when a ship full of Africans arrived.

[Richard Chew:](#) Well, Jamestown was founded as a colony in 1607 by the English, and there were a number of different reasons why the English wanted to be there. But ultimately they're gonna stumble upon what they called "Spanish tobacco," and really become a boom colony focusing on that one cash crop. The problem was trying to find an adequate labor source to farm the tobacco, and initially, that labor force took the form of English peasants.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Why were they willing to come over and do backbreaking work for almost nothing?

[Richard Chew:](#) Well, most of them were looking at this as a true opportunity. The indentured contracts that they signed were for five, seven, nine years sometimes, but at the end of that time you would receive freedom dues, but you would also receive land, and this was something that, for a lot of them, was an unlikely prospect back in England. It would eventually be the case that you would become a landowner, and that's something to which a lot of these people aspired.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) About how many British people were farming in Virginia, and about how many laborers, or indentured servants, were there?

[Richard Chew:](#) Well, overall, over the course of the entire 17th Century, you're looking at approximately 90,000 indentures coming to Virginia. The early part of that, between 1607 and 1619 is only a very small percentage.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) What was happening in England at this time, and with the British king, that eventually affected how we switched from indentured servants to enslaved Africans?

[Richard Chew:](#) When Queen Elizabeth dies in 1603, by arrangement with the Parliament, King James, who had been the King of Scotland, is gonna become the King of England. For a while, that turned out okay. But after James dies, his son Charles

becomes king, and at that point, the English government is increasingly in a position where they effectively can't pay their bills. They're running deficit after deficit. King Charles I's solution to this was to dismiss Parliament and run the entire country by royal decree. The Parliament and the king go to war with each other, Parliament wins, and he's beheaded in 1649. For about 10 years, Parliament tries to run the country on their own, but they realize that they're unable to, and they're going to invite Charles's son, Charles, to return and become king of England.

[Richard Chew:](#)

This is known as the Restoration or the Restoration of the Monarchy. So when Charles II comes back onto the throne, he's got a choice to make. He can make all the same mistakes that his father had, which would be a bad idea because it would lead to his head being separated from the rest of his body, or he can come up with Plan B. And for him, Plan B was to establish more colonies. More colonies equals more trade, more trade equals more taxes so they could pay their bills, and then Charles II could keep his head firmly attached to the rest of his body.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So how did the increase in taxed colonies affect enslaved Africans and indentured white people?

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well, as opposed to being an indentured servant in Virginia, you now had choices. You could, in fact, go as ultimately a freeholder in Pennsylvania or in the Carolinas. You add into that; there's also demographic changes going on in England at the time. The English population is relatively stagnant between 1650 and 1700, and as a result, you've got a situation in which there's just fewer English peasants available, and those who are available to migrate are not migrating to Virginia. And as a result, you're gonna have a labor shortage within Virginia, and you're going to begin to look for alternatives, and that solution for the Virginia planters turns out to be enslaved African labor.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So what happened between 1619, when the first 20 arrived, and the end of the 1700s, when there are thousands of enslaved Africans in Virginia? How did it ramp up?

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well, it doesn't immediately. When the first Africans arrived in 1619, slavery's seen as a supplementary institution to indentured servitude. The English prefer indentures because essentially it's cheaper. As a result, slavery's going to be seen as a supplementary institution to indentured servitude until at least the 1660s, when the available supply of English peasants is going to deteriorate as a result of stagnant population growth within England.

[Richard Chew:](#)

And at that point, you have a ramp-up in terms of the number of Africans coming across the Atlantic to what becomes the United States, particularly to Virginia and Maryland.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

How do you think those white English farmers initially saw Black Africans?

[Richard Chew:](#)

There's a long debate about whether racism precedes slavery, or if slavery is effectively the cause of racism. And I suppose it comes down to how you define each term. In my view, there was clearly racism preceding the institution of slavery within Virginia. Without doubt, the moment that those 20 Africans arrive in Virginia in 1619 aboard the White Lion, they are treated very differently compared to white indentures. And then that remains the case long before slavery ramps up as an institution within the country.

[Richard Chew:](#)

In one very famous case where a number of indentured servants tried to run away and were caught, one of their number, who is an African, is going to be treated differently. And the way the court decides the case is that, based upon their running away, the indentured contracts for all of the white laborers are gonna be extended. But for the enslaved African laborer, the contract wasn't extended largely because there was no contract. He was already considered perpetual labor to the person who claimed ownership over him.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So much is made of 1619 as the year the first Africans were brought to be enslaved in the New World, but actually there's a large case to be made that there were thousands of enslaved Africans who were already here.

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well, certainly the slave trade itself, the Transatlantic slave trade begins in the 1440s. And the Portuguese and the Spanish are across the Atlantic after Columbus arrives in 1492. Shortly after that, they discover gold and silver, and they are importing Africans as laborers very quickly. It expands into the Caribbean as well in terms of the sugar plantations which are laid down there. And so slavery as an institution is already an enormous undertaking and an enormous enterprise for the Spanish and Portuguese long before the English put down roots and Virginia in 1607.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

What do you see as the significance of the arrival of these 20 people in 1619?

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well, I think the big part of this significance here is the beginnings for what becomes the United States. Our chapter in the single largest intercontinental migration in the world. During that period, the 12 and a half million people moved by force from Africa to the Americas, was the largest group of people who migrated anywhere on the planet during the early modern period.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

As an economic historian, what do you want us to understand about 1619?

[Richard Chew:](#)

I think the most important thing to remember here is that for those who claimed ownership over others, for those who were the slave holders, slavery was indeed a choice. It wasn't the case, as many people are too quick to assume, that slavery was the only option that they had. There were clearly other options available, some of the more expensive, but if in fact as an economic historian, you want to take a look at this in terms of just simple supply and demand. Sure. It could be argued that slavery represented a cheaper institution compared to other opportunities, other choices. But that takes out the moral

equation, and it takes out what at the time people referred to as political economy in terms of making moral choices with regard to what you do in terms of economic choices. And for these individuals, they chose the cheapest route, even though it wasn't the moral route, and they were able to justify this based on racism. The reason why, in fact, they were able to get around their moral qualms was that they do indeed see those that they're enslaving from Africa as somehow less than themselves.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

You in your studies have seen two revolutions in early America, one, the creation of the longest democracy in the world, the other leading to the largest economy in the world. What's your theory on the earliest beginnings that set us on that path to the largest economy?

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well, there's been on very long debate about the origins of what we see as the American capitalist giant. The literature really begins in the 1920s with Percy Bidwell who made the argument that essentially the early American economy, the colonial economy was a subsistence-based Agrarian economy in which people really weren't concerned about profits. And then at some point, there's some sort of capitalist revolution or market revolution, which sets America down a capitalist path, but others have disagreed with this. And these guys fall into the idea of a continuity thesis in which in the words of Carl Degler from the 1950s capitalism came in the first ships. And as a result, there's essentially no difference, really, between the earliest Virginia merchants, 19th-century industrialists, and Bill Gates.

[Richard Chew:](#)

It's just simply a matter of degree. And for me now, the one of those theories really works. What I think works is the idea that you're moving from and Atlantic-based economy, a colonial period in which you're growing materials, you're extracting materials, you're exporting materials, and you're importing manufactured goods to a period after 1800 in which you're trying to build a national economy, one based on building internal institutions like banks, turnpikes, insurance companies in order to actually produce national markets. And promote westward expansion. So the real solution here, the third way is a transition, not from pre-capitalism to capitalism, but rather from an Atlantic-based capitalism to a continental or national based capitalism.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So an economy at first it was based on shipping goods back to Europe and exchanging that way to one where there was an internal trade. Where does slavery fit into that growth of the national US economy?

[Richard Chew:](#)

Well it fits in in a number of ways. So within the Southern states where slavery remains fully entrenched, after 1807 the Transatlantic slave trade ends, and as a result, the way in which slavery is going to expand is internally and through westward expansion, through the creation of an internal slave market, which is really driving a significant amount of capital formation within the United States as well. So the movement of slavery westward is actually a parallel to the

movement of markets westward, which is ongoing throughout the early Republic.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Some people have argued that commemorating this year, 1619 almost 400 years ago as the time and the first Africans arrived to be enslaved on the North American continent in a way diminishes an understanding of the contributions of Africans in formulating this country. That it makes it sound as though, well, Europeans were here, belonged here, and we're simply awaiting the arrival of labor. Whereas another way of looking at this is that for one thing, Africans had been creating the infrastructure of this country long before that. And also we're all arrivals, right?

[Richard Chew:](#) Without question. I think the way that in which early American historians are now looking at the colonial period is in terms of a world which is part of a larger world, an Atlantic world in which people from Western Europe, people from Western Africa, and people from the eastern part of North America, all contributed very substantially to what then becomes the colonial story. If in fact, you take a look at this in terms of three stories coming together, a West African story, a Native American story, and an English story then, in fact, you have a far richer and more understandable history that actually makes sense of the events that took place at the time.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Well, Richard Chew, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

[Richard Chew:](#) Well, thank you.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Richard Chew is a professor of history at Virginia State University. His forthcoming book is Transforming the Engine of Prosperity: The Eclipse of the Atlantic Economy, and The Rise of Economic Nationalism in the Early Republic. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

[New Speaker:](#) [Music break]

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Welcome back to With Good Reason. The following interviews on slavery and public memory are from a program we first aired in 2015.

[Scarlett O'Hara:](#) "War, war, war. This war talk's spoiling all the fun at every party this spring! I get so bored, I could scream."

[Sarah McConnell:](#) The classic film Gone With the Wind still influences the way today's plantation museums present themselves to tourists, but what often goes missing or is misrepresented at these plantations are stories of the enslaved men and women on whose backs vast fortunes were made and whose descendants experience the racism of today. Steven Hannah is studying how slavery is represented at plantation museums in the South starting in Louisiana. Hannah's chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Mary Washington.

Through a National Science Foundation grant, he's working with faculty from six other universities to study how the stories of slavery and emancipation are being told and in many cases left out.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

The three-year grant support six different institutions from Texas up to Virginia to study plantations in three different regions. The Louisiana's River Road, the area between Charleston and Savannah, from Georgia to South Carolina, the low country, and then the James River region from Richmond to Norfolk in Virginia. So we will be picking the most visited plantations because we want the ones that have the biggest impact on the way we understand our pasts, and we are interviewing and surveying visitors, docents, and owners of these plantations.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So what would be the gold standard for how to tell the story of the people who were enslaved then and built and created the fortune that the plantations represent?

[Steven Hannah:](#)

Recognize that they are enslaved because there was an enslaver. That is a relationship; you can't talk about one without the other. You can't segregate the narrative so you only talk about the rich people in the big house and the slaves in the slave quarters. You have to talk about the slaves in the big house because they were there. They created the wealth, as you said. They made the house operate. They took care of the White children. Then talk about the owner in the slave quarters because their lives were structured by his decisions, or her decisions, and actions, and the overseer that he hired, and the punishments, and the buying and selling of their bodies as commodities.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

Recently, Whitney Plantation in Louisiana opened its doors to the public with exclusively the story of slavery on Louisiana Plantations.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

Yes, Whitney Plantation in Louisiana, which is very close by to Oak Alley and Laura Plantation kind of turns the story, the traditional way of telling the story of plantations, inside out. You start by going by these memorial walls where you have the names of men and women who were enslaved at Whitney and where they were from, and just by saying a name and a date and maybe East Coast or Georgia or a Caribbean island, now we're thinking of the slave trade, the domestic slave trade, the shipping of slaves from Richmond, Virginia down to New Orleans to feed the sugar industry or feed the cotton industry.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

All of a sudden that becomes part of their narrative. They can tell stories about a young woman named Anna who was sold with her mother from somewhere in the Chesapeake region and survived a ship over to Louisiana, knows that her mother was with her one time, and then all of a sudden was thrown overboard and was no longer with her because she had died during the journey and she ends up being a gift to the woman of the house at Whitney Plantation. One of the ways that we tell stories and get people into history is to try to get people to

emotionally attached to characters. The good plantations are the ones who successfully get people to buy into the lives of the owners.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

That's why people keep coming back to these places, is you learn about these "interesting people" from history. So in order to talk about slavery and to try to help people identify emotionally with the enslaved, you have to be a little tell similar stories, and at Whitney, in addition to the names and the dates and the places, they also then have excerpts from the Federal Writer's Project, which is part of the Works Progress Administration in the late '30s where they interviewed very old people who were children in the 1850s and 1860s, so they remembered being enslaved. They describe punishment; they describe what they ate; they describe just what the course of a day was like.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

They described their masters, either kind or not. And then the only other thing I'd say is these places are surrounded by communities, often African American communities, some of whom are descendants of the very people you're portraying. And to create these narratives without talking to your surrounding communities and negotiating with them about how to tell the story, I think might lead you to do something that might be seen as excessive or deficient, but you can bring these stories to life, attach them to the stories of the plantation.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

How can you? Like what?

[Steven Hannah:](#)

Thinking in Virginia, the—unfortunately, the plantation where Gabriel of Gabriel's Rebellion isn't a museum. It doesn't exist anymore. Just outside of Richmond, a slave named Gabriel, along with several others, organized what some historians believe to be a potentially massive slave rebellion. People number his supporters in the low hundreds, to into the low thousands, spread out from Richmond down the James River. Gabriel's plan was to march into Richmond and kidnap the governor, James Monroe at the time, I believe, and use that leverage to gain freedom. It was ready to start. There was a bad thunderstorm. They delayed it for a night. Somebody panicked, spilled the beans, the authorities moved in, Gabriel was arrested and of course, hung, and that was the end of it. So the rebellion didn't happen. But being able to tell that story and be free to tell that story as part of a plantation history and not just as a separate thing and a bunch of signs somewhere else that people might not actually find as they tour the region.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

And in Louisiana, the area where you're looking, tell me about the so-called German Coast uprising near New Orleans.

[Steven Hannah:](#)

Well, that was early 1800s, just I think the first decade. And so just upriver from the city of New Orleans. So this amounted to a few hundred slaves getting together, arming themselves the best they could, and marching on the city of New Orleans. The planters, of course, got themselves together, got help from the city and state government, and were able to crush the rebellion fairly quickly. This is potentially one of the more controversial things that Whitney

Plantation might do, is they want to add an exhibit commemorating the German Coast rebellion. And what that would involve is presenting in graphic sculptures the results of the punishments of the slaves who had rebelled, who were sometimes shot, and then beheaded, sometimes just beheaded, sometimes hung, and then beheaded. And then the heads would be placed on stakes to warn the other slaves that this is what would happen to you.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) You're kidding. Did that really happen?

[Steven Hannah:](#) That absolutely happened.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Beheaded and heads on stakes.

[Steven Hannah:](#) Yes.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) It's so Heart of Darkness.

[Steven Hannah:](#) Very much so and very Medieval. It's the kind of thing you read about outside of Medieval European cities to say 'this is what happens to traitors,' but this is part of our history. It's part of the history wherever you had any of these rebellions, the effort to put them down and then to make an example of the leaders; this is what will happen to you.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) So whether I am a White parent or an African American parent, I don't know that I want to take my young children to a plantation to see heads on stakes. I don't know that I want to say "Yes, there is this brutality, darling, and I need you never to forget that."

[Steven Hannah:](#) And that is the difficulty of—this is the one part of the Whitney Plantation that's sort of off in the corner of the plantation, a lake and on the lake, there's an island with a bridge to it, a optional extension of the tour where they would probably strongly suggest that families with young children not crossed the bridge.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) So aren't a lot of visitors just looking for pomp and circumstance that is not part of their own lives, but they want to see it writ large?

[Steven Hannah:](#) Yes. These plantation museums are seen as iconic of the United States south. These are things that people think the United States south is all about. Whether it's because they saw *Gone With the Wind* or heard of *Gone With the Wind*, or *Roots*, if they're more interested in stories of the enslaved or more recent things like *12 Years a Slave*. They have an idea of what a US plantation is, and they go there because they want to learn the story, and by learning story they had, they will say, yes, I want, I'm interested in history. We have any number of interviews and surveys where they say, yes, I'm a history buff. I want to know these things.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Do you think there is any economic pressure on people interpreting these great homes? Do you think that they fear that if they don't just talk about the hoop skirts and magnificence of the owners that they won't have people coming through their doors to visit?

[Steven Hannah:](#) Yes. The idea of telling dark, difficult history sounds like, "Oh, well who would want to make that part of their vacations?" Of course, that's very difficult. Again, whether it's comments on TripAdvisor or Yelp or questions that the tour guides we interviewed keeps saying they are getting or whether their responses of the visitors to our own surveys. There's a significant number of people who don't have a problem hearing something about the enslaved. Want to know a little bit more about them. Recognize that talking about a plantation without talking about the enslaved is kind of ridiculous at this point, that as a society we are ready to be able to engage with this. How we remember our past has a, has a real impact on some of the issues we face today. We are a society marked by growing inequality and those inequalities have for most of our history, followed racial lines almost exactly.

[New Speaker:](#) When we as a society struggle with racial inequality, we struggle with it in part because we do not remember that for 250 years of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, urban redlining, federal housing policy, we have done everything possible to make it very, very difficult for African Americans to accumulate wealth and to pass it onto their children. And the single biggest predictor of your standing in life in our country is your parents' standing in life in this country. And unfortunately, more and more we are a society of inheritance. And if we have denied for generations and generations, the majority of African Americans from accumulating wealth and passing it on to their children, we are ... and if we don't remember that as part of our history, then how can we hope to address racial inequality?

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Steve Hannah, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

[Steven Hannah:](#) Well, thank you very much, Sarah. I've enjoyed it very much.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Steve Hannah's chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Mary Washington. You're listening to With Good Reason. Up next, teaching slavery and emancipation in our schools.

[New Speaker:](#) My next guest studies the way stories of slavery and emancipation are told in school, especially when it comes to what gets left out of the school curricula. Gabriel Rich teaches education at Virginia Commonwealth University. He says school play an important role in shaping collective memories of the Civil War. Gabriel, you've been investigating the way young people learn about the Civil War and slavery in the education system. What prompted you to look into this?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

I grew up in New York City. I taught high school history there, and I first came down to Richmond, which was the Capital of the Confederacy, for my job interview. We were driving around the city, and we went down Monument Avenue where the history of the Confederacy is celebrated with statues of Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, and as a northerner, I was very surprised to see this. I didn't know it really existed. Of course, we have Union monuments in New York all over the place. But the difference in who is being celebrated here in Richmond was what made it stick out to me. And that started my interest in how the Civil War is remembered in states that were part of the Confederacy.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So what's you're trying to figure out is how do we tell the story of slavery in southern school systems?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

Well, really what we're looking at now is the end result. What do undergraduates who've been through 12 years of public school, what do they come away with about the role that African Americans played in the Civil War? So we administered this survey to over 3000 people. In particular, the undergraduate students. One of the surprises was that a lot of our respondents believe that African Americans fought for both sides in the Civil War.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

Is that totally wrong?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

It is 97% wrong. There was a large African American presence on Civil War battlefields on both sides. But the nature of the participation was different. On the union side, you had African Americans before the Emancipation Proclamation who were either liberated by Union troops or liberated themselves and left their owners and followed the Union army. And these were thousands and thousands of people—men, women, children. And they did all kinds of work in those Union army camps, much of which was unpleasant work. On the Confederate side, African Americans were not given a choice. They were told, "You're going to go and follow your master into battle." They were not trained to fight. They certainly were not given weapons in the south. This was a very—this was a nightmare for many southerners. So they were there really to prevent their owners from doing work that was deemed below their station. There was a lot of anxiety about the sons of slave-owning families doing work that was below their station.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

Had there been resistance even in the north to African American men fighting in the northern side?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

Yes. And, and widespread racist beliefs that African American men did not have the requisite attributes to be good soldiers. That they would be too scared, that they were not intelligent enough or brave enough. And this was completely proved wrong by facts on the ground. There was also in the north pressure to enlist African Americans from abolitionist activists like Frederick Douglass and from whites who did not want to serve in the war. The way the draft worked in

the north was that if you paid \$300, you could get out of it. So there was, there was, I would say a lot of ambivalence about the Union cause in New York City. Poor, desperately poor, Irish immigrants thought they were fighting a war instead of their wealthy neighbors in order to liberate African Americans who they feared would then compete with them for jobs. On top of that, the casualties were huge.

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

So they saw their friends and neighbors coming back in pine boxes. And, racism was rampant throughout the country at the time. So the biggest insurrection other than the Civil War in this country was in New York City. And the draft riots were riots, by lower class New Yorkers, mostly of Irish descent. And they lynched and burned down Black institutions all over New York City because they did not want to serve. And actually, Union troops had to leave the Gettysburg battlefield and go back to New York to put down the insurrection by force. So there was tremendous pressure on the Union to enlist African Americans.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

And I wonder if as the war progressed, more African Americans and former slaves were pressed by southern fighters to help them out in their desperation?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

Yeah. Very prominent Confederates like Robert E. Lee and Judah Benjamin supported the idea of enlisting African Americans in exchange for some form of freedom. This plan was eventually enacted, but very late in the war 1865, it was voluntary and voluntary on the part of slave owners. So African Americans had no say in whether they were going to be enlisted or not. Slave owners could decide to hand over their property to the Confederate army for training. Fewer than a hundred were ever trained, and they never saw a real battle. And the fear of armed Black men was so strong that in Richmond, the capitol, the soldiers, the Black soldiers who were being trained were actually kept in a prison at night, locked away. So again, very different situations. And this contrasts greatly with how people remember African American participation.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

So this is something you call the myth of the Black Confederate. Why do you think there is the myth in the first place?

[Gabriel Rich:](#)

Well, this is what is so interesting about our findings. People who had an ancestor who fought for the Confederacy were more likely to say that African Americans fought on both sides in the Civil War. The question is why? And if African Americans fought for both sides equally, then that morally exonerates that person's ancestors who fought for the Confederacy, they, it means that they weren't fighting to maintain chattel slavery. They were fighting to create a new country called the Confederacy. It makes the southern cause a morally defensible one.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

How interesting though that in this day and age, people now want to express that position that "Hey, my ancestors who fought for the south were fighting alongside African Americans." Maybe 75 years ago, they wouldn't have raced to try to make that point.

[Gabriel Rich:](#) Absolutely, and that I would say 40 years ago they wouldn't have raced to make that point.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Yeah.

[Gabriel Rich:](#) Up until the 1970s, Virginia textbooks, said that African American slaves were very happy. They were content and that they needed the strong hand of their White masters in order to survive in the world.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Why are you concerned that people continue to believe in the myth of the Black Confederate? Is that damaging?

[Gabriel Rich:](#) I think it's damaging because it takes slavery out of the Civil War as an important factor, if not the most important factor. Without coming to terms with that, we have a very hard time understanding what has happened since the Civil War, and how race works in our society is, it's harder to understand if the importance of race in the Civil War is not really appreciated. How a society remembers these things is important because this is how we construct our identities, and if the American national identity doesn't at all come to terms with the way in which race has played out in our history, then we really have a skewed understanding of our past which skews our understanding of the present. So for example, another belief which is very common is that Abraham Lincoln emancipated African Americans. That emancipation was a gift, a gift from Whites to African Americans. And when you get a gift, you're supposed to be very grateful for that gift. Now, many, many African Americans emancipated themselves and pushed Lincoln's hand towards writing that document and signing that document. If you only get a story in school in which your ancestors had no agency, you're going to be much less likely to be interested in that history. And you're going to have much less of a connection with that.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Gabriel Rich teaches education at Virginia Commonwealth University. Major support for *With Good Reason* is provided by the law firm of McGuire Woods and by the University of Virginia Health System, a National Cancer Institute, Designated Cancer Center, researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, uvahealth.com. *With Good Reason* is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk Kelley Libby, Cass Adair, and Alison Byrne. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.