

Primary Source

Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project*, August 14, 2019



What progress has been made in the twentieth century in the fight to realize Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans? What work must still be done?

- I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the 1960s to the present day.
- I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans.
- I can explain why the civil rights movement fractured in the 1960s.
- I can compare movements for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans over time.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Building Context

In 2019, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones led an effort by *The New York Times Magazine* to reexamine the legacy of slavery in the United States. *The 1619 Project* featured a variety of essays by journalists and academics, as well as poems, short stories, and a photo essay that were timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in Virginia. Hannah-Jones won a Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for her work on the project. The following is taken from her essay introducing the project: “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

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Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>

<p>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.</p> <p>...</p> <p>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.</p> <p>...</p> <p>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.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
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Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. According to Hannah-Jones, how did African Americans build the United States?

2. What do you think Hannah-Jones means by saying that African Americans are the “perfecters” of democracy?

3. Hannah-Jones drew criticism for asserting that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” Based on your reading of the Founding documents and other sources in this curriculum, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?