The 1857 Project

This special issue examines the history of slavery, segregation and racism in our region. It was produced with the help and financial support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The 1857 Project: Extracting the poison of racism from America’s soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Land of Dred Scott: Scenes from our racist history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Press flubs first draft of history of race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Vulnerable neighborhood faces shorter life expectancy and COVID-19 dangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>A family’s fight for freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>New lights shine on riots against blacks in East St. Louis and across America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Unmasking the Veiled Prophet — for jobs not black debutantes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>The slave state of Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Underground Railroad in Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Lincoln-Douglas debates marred by overt racism of both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Douglas: I’m in favor of confining citizenship to white men’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Freeport Doctrine helps Douglas win Illinois and lose nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>In Egypt — the shame of letting Frederick Douglass ride next to a white woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Lincoln: ‘Physical differences ... forever forbid the two races from living together’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Lincoln: The negro has a ‘humble’ share of Declaration of Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Lincoln: Granting negro equality as fantastical as proving ‘horse-chesnut to be a chesnut horse’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Lincoln: Slavery represents ‘eternal struggle between ... right and wrong’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>200 lynched in Missouri and Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Lynching in Missouri and Illinois from 1836 to 1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>The Clayton conundrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Did St. Louis find way to end civil war over ‘Lost Cause’ monuments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Looking back: Legacy of slavery limited opportunities at Post-Dispatch and beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Can Missouri show political correctness, equality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Redlining’s long lasting mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>There’s never been a proper apology for slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Mixed In: Life as a ‘mixed’ student at KHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Kirkwood redistricting raises questions about race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Northside Knights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Re-examination of the American Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>The American Dream is based on a whitewashed version of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Hannah-Jones tried to be passionate, not objective — and she was right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Summer chores remind me of the hard work of African Americans building America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Ignoring true history of America’s founding can hurt later generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>The divisive effect of the 1619 project’s evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>Black people have right to claim America as their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>White racism continues in the American South because of past human slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Civil Rights Act didn’t help when students wanted a burger and fries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The American Dream is based on a whitewashed version of history
by Zoe Yudovich

"Hard work pays off ... Pull yourself up by your bootstraps," these statements embody the American Dream — the dream parents sell their children to motivate them, the dream through which we view immigrants entering our glorious country, and the dream used to exalt ourselves above other nations. Dictionary.com defines the American Dream as the "ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American," which shows that America is a meritocracy.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, a staff writer for the New York Times and creator of the 1619 Project, challenges our whitewashed knowledge of American history and calls into question the dream. We are the land of the free, home of the brave, and if you work hard in American, your dreams will come true. But is this everyone’s reality? Hannah-Jones explains that America was built on the backs of slaves. Therefore the American Dream is a lie. Her claim delegitimizes the American dream because it is not accessible to all people.

Capitalism was founded upon the institution of slavery, which created systems that currently prohibit African Americans from enjoying the benefits of the dream. "In order to understand American capitalism, you have to start at the plantation," wrote Mathew Desmond, a sociologist professor at Princeton University. Desmond criticizes the roots of capitalism and gives recognition to the true founders — slaves. According to Desmond, in 1831, America was delivering almost half the world’s raw cotton crop, and due to the large-scale cultivation of cotton, the factory was created, which triggered the Industrial Revolution.

During the peak of slavery, the combined value of all the slaves was worth more than all the railroads and factories. Desmond said Plantations — more accurately forced labor camps — created a new economy — one that closely resembles modern-day corporations. For example, slaves were hunched over and worked in long rows. Today, our factories are also in rows, known as assembly lines. Plantations had multiple supervisors and used beatings to force slaves to harvest more crops. Today, salesforce has multiple supervisors and incentivize employees to go above their targets and lose their jobs. Nowadays, people take out mortgages for their houses. Mortgages were created for plantation owners to get more capital and would mortgage their slaves to banks because it was easier than mortgaging their own property.

Slavery created all these systems that are needed for capitalism to thrive. Capitalism was started by exploiting African Americans by using them for intensive labor and continues to exploit people today. The richest one-tenth of 1% owns as much as the bottom 90% and McDonald’s CEO makes an hour what the average worker makes a year, according to Douglas A. McIntyre, former editor and publisher of Financial World Magazine. This system of income inequality makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Capitalism is the heart of the American dream and it’s the barbaric and exploitative foundation that threatens the existence of a fallacy many individuals hold dear to their hearts. According to Americanprogress.org, the average median wealth for black families was about $20,000 in 2016 compared with white families’ median wealth of $171,000. Slavery might have been abolished over 150 years ago, but these systems have maintained inequality from slave times. The institution of slavery is an example of American hypocrisy because capitalism was built upon slavery and African Americans weren’t given the opportunity to reap the benefits, contradicting the principles of the American dream.

The American Dream is an ideal that the country embodies. Humanity buys into it because it gives us a sense of hope. But it leaves us disappointed. In reality, the dream is not accessible to all people, especially African Americans who helped create it. American freedom is the foundation of the American dream because it’s based on the idea of individuality and paving a road to accomplish your dream. The military has always been a symbol of American freedom because we are protecting what other countries envy and want to dismantle. Hannah-Jones comments that her father believed his country would treat him well if he served in the military, but was passed over for opportunities and was discharged. She says "like all the black men and women in my family, he believed in hard work, but like all the black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead." This was the sad reality for all African Americans who would enlist in the military in that time period. From the Revolutionary War to Vietnam, African Americans would return after their service and wouldn't be given their medals or the same benefits other veterans received.

According to History.com, the GI bill excluded over 1.2 million African Americans who served in World War II. This shows how the American dream didn’t apply to all people because even though African Americans fought for America overseas, they weren't given the same freedoms they fought for. African Americans have always been a prime example of hypocrisy in America in terms of freedom. While the Founding Fathers were writing our constitution, slaves were building their houses. While Thomas Jefferson established America as the land of the free, enslaved African Americans were constructing the White House. African Americans were the first to stand up for their freedoms and were responsible for making America the true "land of the free."

People criticize the 1619 Project because they believe the American Dream is still alive and well. However, there are systems that grant individuals privileges prohibiting everyone from accessing the dream. Individuals have the privilege — whether it exists as race, socioeconomic factors, education, gender, and sexuality. According to a 2017 study by Harvard Business School, African Americans with better credentials on their resume are less likely to get a job compared to their white counterparts purely because of their "black-sounding" name. This privilege is only afforded to white students, even though African Americans work just as hard, because of racial bias. African Americans own approximately one-tenth of the wealth of white Americans, are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to be incarcerated. These are the consequences of systemic racism which shows there isn’t an equal playing field for all individuals. For instance, public school funding is determined by property tax dollars. Wealthy districts have more money for their schools. This creates a learning gap between "poor" schools and "rich" schools which harms minority students the most. There haven’t been any attempts to try to dismantle these examples of systemic racism, but the hope of even having a dream can’t exist without everyone being equal. The American dream doesn’t apply to all because minorities aren’t given equal opportunity required for the American Dream to be successful.

Society views slavery as if it was just one of America’s sins, which undermines the contributions of slaves. This doesn’t threaten the work of the Founding Fathers but gives recognition to the ones who were ignored. Today, many kids are told, "anything is possible," and, "if you work hard, your dreams will come true." For marginalized citizens, dreams are much harder to accomplish because not everyone starts at the same starting line. Hannah-Jones’s argument undermines the American dream because it is not accessible to all people. Society encourages individuals to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," but some people don't even have boots.
Hannah-Jones tried to be passionate, not objective — and she was right

by John Ruland

I live in America. Here, we’re reminded every day of the names of our Framers, through the places we live, the streets we drive, and the parks we play in. We’re especially inundated with reminders of our first president — there are 88 different cities alone that are named Washington. But Nikole Hannah-Jones, staff writer for the New York Times, wants to put the spotlight on a different group for once, asserting that black people are the most deserving of “American ideals,” not people like the Framers or Abraham Lincoln. She describes the history and the legacy of African Americans in a way that is unheard of in the mainstream. Her argument is controversial in the extreme, but she had the sense to address it the right way. If somebody else were writing about an issue this sensitive, they might try to make it more palatable, which would sacrifice the heart of the essay. But Hannah-Jones is not that person. She tells the story her way, with the voice of a passionate expert — an opinionated expert — filling the text. Her rhetoric and her argument are not meant for traditionalists, people who value the popular version of American history almost to a
fault. Instead, they are meant to be a shining beacon of hope for people who are ready for a history that hasn’t been whitewashed. It’s an alternative, not a magic wand that makes a hardcore Civil War buff repeal their allegiances. Anyone who believes that Hannah-Jones’ essay should have been meeker needs to look closer to find her real purpose.

To discover why Hannah-Jones’ essay was not aimed at everyone. It’s necessary to look at her intended audience. When she describes black people and white people in history, she uses two completely different tones. She tells the anecdotes of black people’s contributions to history in a patriotic, respectful way. “No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it,” she writes, “and to this day, black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good.” She devotes a long paragraph to Reconstruction, which serves as a vehicle to show how effective government was when black people ran it. She describes blacks as the “architects” of America, building the Capitol, the plantations, and wealthy people’s houses. Conversely, she uses a sardonic tone towards white people in history. She chose not to use any non-racist white people for her anecdotes. She challenges the label “The Greatest Generation” by retelling many examples of oppression that make the 40s and the 50s look... not so great. Saccharistically, she writes, “Black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation’s failings.” While America dealt with this “inconvenience” by supporting a cruel racial caste system.

An unfortunate idea that some people have (one that I used to have) is that journalistic writing needs to be ideologically accessible to all people, all the time. For example, in my yearbook class, we weren’t allowed to put opinions in our stories at all. Junior reporters on the beat are just supposed to report, not argue. But everyone’s beliefs are different, especially with an issue so sensitive as race. To achieve her purpose, Hannah-Jones had to abandon the idea that she was going to be accepted by all her readers, and so she chose to be loud and clear about what she believed in.

One way authors can show bravado and strength is in their portrayal of good versus evil. In Hannah-Jones’ essay, it’s clear who the protagonists and the antagonists are. There is one anecdote that she uses, in which Abraham Lincoln calls all the black Congressmen to the White House to suggest to them that all black Americans flee the country when they’re freed. “You and we are different races,” she quotes from Lincoln. “Your race suffers very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side.” She presents Abraham Lincoln as the antagonist — the racist president expelling the black congressmen out of their homeland. Hannah-Jones is aware that people who idolize figures like Lincoln aren’t likely to be receptive to this narrative. The people who will understand her are the ones who want a more accurate, inclusive version of history. Hannah-Jones wants to make sure they have something strong to believe in, so she loses a little objectivity to make her points resonate more clearly. And — again — that’s okay.

This purpose is illuminated further by the structure of Hannah-Jones’ essay, which is in chronological order. By peppering her claim with evidence that transcended 400 years, she was able to show that her argument held up over time. In addition, chronological order is the structure of textbooks, and she was, in a way, creating a new kind of textbook. Her writing is a new version of history, so it makes sense that she would write it like a history book. Hannah-Jones begins with the first black man to die in the Revolutionary War, goes through the Founding Fathers, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and the present day. Each time, she spotlights the real heroes of America, and discards the figureheads whom we have idolized for so many years. The chronological-order choice keeps the credibility of a textbook and blends it with Hannah-Jones’ own style to create the unapologetic remix she desired. Moreover, the chronology supports the idea that this essay isn’t really meant to persuade anyone in particular, especially people who think of the Founding Fathers as heroes and the 40s as being the good old days. The structure is a history lesson, not a speech. Her essay is educational, not preachy. Her words tell a story about her race.

While what and who an author writes about is certainly important, where she writes it can tell a lot about her purpose as well. The New York Times caters to a very specific niche of America. NYT readers are mostly in their late thirties and early forties, according to Hitwise, a marketing firm. The median household income of its readers is $191,000 for the paper, and $96,000 for the website — so most of them aren’t strapped for cash. They’re very progressive, with 72 percent of readers identifying as liberal. And they’re 24 percent more likely than the average American to be interested in “other cultures.” This means readers are willing to consider other perspectives other than their own. They’re receptive to a narrative that’s different than the status quo. Even if they’re not black (which they probably aren’t — sadly, the statistics show that black households are almost $100K less affluent than white ones), the audience Hannah-Jones reached is a progressive, open-minded one. It’s receptive to change, and new narratives. Fox News or Breitbart would be a very different nut to crack, and even PBS and MSNBC have lower percentages of liberal viewers. The vast majority of NYT readers probably don’t idolize the Framers. They probably drive Priuses. I’ve been reading the New York Times every Sunday for as long as I can remember, and I was shocked by the revelations I learned from Hannah-Jones’ essay. But I believed her. So she didn’t really even need to write to her critics. She gave her audience something unapologetic, because she knew they could accept it.

But what about the people who don’t believe her? Those people are still important to the impact of Hannah-Jones’ essay. Some people might say that by arguing that she’s conscious of her audience. I’m disavowing the broader impact of her essay on all of America. But by using such inflammatory language, she got people to notice her, for better or for worse. People who would never agree with her still read her words, took the bait and spread the article around. Nevil Gingrich, a former House Speaker known for his conservative viewpoints, appeared on Fox and Friends and denounced the 1619 Project as “historically, factually false nonsense.” He called the New York Times “a propaganda paper worthy of Pravda.” Gingrich proved that he wasn’t philosophically influenced by the arguments in Hannah-Jones’ essay, which echoes my point that not everyone was intended to be influenced by her argument. But his interview showed how effective it was for Hannah-Jones not to hold back. By mentioning the 1619 Project on a conservative network, the number of people who will be exposed to the project, and her essay, will increase significantly. If her strong language lands on Fox or Breitbart, Hannah-Jones is the one who wins.

Black Americans Fought to Make Them True is a powerful essay. It upends a narrative widely held by millions of people, and elevates a historically undervalued and oppressed racial group in the process.

People needed to read something like this. But what they didn’t need was an overly neutral grab for clicks and views. By staying true to her voice and her target audience, using the sharp tone that made her famous as a journalist and speaker, Nikole Hannah-Jones has risen above the demands of public journalism. She is not a catch-all, copy-churning machine. She is an advocate of her race, her country, and her story. What this essay does is distill that passion and technique into a history lesson, one that this country has needed for quite some time.
Summer chores remind me of the hard work of African Americans building America

by Reuben Thomas

When summer rolls around, the time comes for home restoration: cleaning gutters, pulling weeds, cutting grass. These events are always a family affair, when everyone in the house is rushed out by my hurrying dad in attempts to get in as many hours of daylight as possible to get every project done. As my siblings and I begin our chores, we become restless—wanting to return to the cool-air-conditioned home to escape the beatings on our backs from the blaring sun. Our plans to escape however, usually backfire resulting in lectures from my father. My brothers and I, as we are told off, continue to work and mouth the words of what my father would say, as we had heard this infamous lecture every summer.

My dad, a man of mixed-race, would repeat to us that when he worked outside in the blazing heat he thought about our ancestors, the inhumane conditions they were put in, the beatings they took, and how they would be forced to work outside in more extreme conditions and get nothing in return. Everytime this story is repeated to me, it makes me think about the struggles that black people went through to gain rights in this country, and I always feel for how hard it must have been to be a black person in America. In these moments I never really think about how the struggles and the labor done by black people contributed to the United States. I always focused on how bad things were and not how much black people built up our country.

That was until I was introduced to the 1619 project. The 1619 project was developed by Nikole Hannah-Jones and designed to highlight the 400th anniversary of the first slave ship coming to America. It's goal is to re-educate us about slavery and putting the contributions made by black people at the very foundation that holds up American society. She rewrites history to give more credit to the overlooked contributions of black people.

The 1619 project begins with an essay by Hannah-Jones entitled “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written.” Black Americans have fought to make them true.” In this essay, Hannah-Jones goes into detail about the contributions that black people have made and how they have built this country from the ground up. She introduces a new perspective as to how black people contributed to this country, while refuting previous thoughts and beliefs about black people’s contributions. Hannah-Jones claims re-education is necessary. The mindset of racism that stems from our past needs to be removed from modern-day American textbooks, including the shadowing of black accomplishments and history and the fake perfection and glorification of popular white historical figures.

Racism is an equation. It is a combination of hate based on race together with the authority to wield power over that race. While there are modern day acts of racism, a lasting form of racism is one that exists in the classroom—the suppression of black people and anything that may be associated with black people from American history. In an attempt to not let black people have any credit for the crafting of America’s foundation, anything that could be attributed to black people is essentially blocked out of major historical events. An example can be found in Hannah-Jones’ essay in which she explains that America’s founding event, gaining independence, was based around black people. “Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” Due to the fact that black people could have been a reason for such a big moment in American history is the reason that these ideas have never been shared in history textbooks and taught in United States schools. This tactic of oppressing blacks in American history is a way to make not only black people think but all Americans think that black people really haven’t contributed much to this country.

Even when first learning about history, it can be taught to children that only one group of people is responsible for the success of America, which can lead to racism being taught. Hannah-Jones puts herself back into the mind of her younger self and describes how she was taught about her identity and how it related to American history. “I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn’t really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation.” Instilling into students that black people had very little to contribute to this country is the form that racism takes in history lessons. Through the racism equation, the hate of the black race demonstrated by historians is being held over black people by the people writing history. Action needs to be taken against teaching youths that black people had very little to contribute to American history. It is this false teaching that has shadowed black people’s contributions to America.

While certain groups of people in history are not acknowledged at all for their contributions to America, others are given too much attention and are looked at as American heroes. Several of these popular white American heroes are put atop pedestals and are symbols of America and what it supposedly stands for. However the “heroes,” that we put up on pedestals are not perfect and should not be treated as such. The narratives that America has put on white politicians is an attempt to try and make them look as squeaky-clean as possible and make them be the heroes of America while covering up bad actions, such as ownership of slaves.

History however should be as close to the truth as possible, and to get rid of the racism that clogs the textbooks of today. History needs to be honest when it comes down to historical figures and their actions. To start off with honesty, Hannah-Jones points out the hypocrisy that beloved politician Thomas Jefferson was exuding, simply by stating a fact. “As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master’s beck and call,” she wrote. These inspiring words written by Thomas Jefferson were written but not applied to America that “all men are created equal,” and that all men deserve the right to “Life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Whenever we learn about Thomas Jefferson we learn about the Declaration of Independence, but we never talk about how he never wanted to give the freedoms he wrote about to the people who were helping him build the country and being forced to labor on his plantation—or forced labor camp as Hannah-Jones accurately calls it.

But Jefferson is not the only one who has skeletons in his closet. Abraham Lincoln does as well. Hannah-Jones digs deep into Lincoln and addresses the fact that when trying to find a resolution for the Civil War, Lincoln wanted to move all black people out of America because he believed that white people and black people could not live peacefully in the same place. This fact would be surprising to most, especially since Lincoln is known best for abolishing slavery. Lincoln is seen as a beacon of hope. For some he even inspired the “Negro Anthem.” The first time it was ever sung was on the anniversary of his death. But Lincoln never really has been held accountable for his statements that he has made in the past. The people we put atop pedestals in this country are the people who while they may have done some right, have also done some wrong. Because they were white men, America does not want to ruin their reputations. However it is time that we start to take everything into account.

Some people may disagree with the statement that there is still a mindset of racism in the way that America teaches history, and others say we are nowhere near where we used to be. While it may be true that America has come a pretty decent way when it comes to race relations, that does not have anything to do with the American history system and how it mistreats and objectifies black people and glorifies white men. The people who have written history, go all the way back from when history first began. History comes from the journals, the letters, the books of the past and the people writing those journals and letters.
The divisive effect of the 1619 project’s evidence
by Ian Feld

When the names of the most famous African American authors, scientists, activists, and leaders are Googled, the first lines of their biographies are noticeably missing a certain qualifier: “American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author, writer and editor,” reads the first few lines of W.E.B. Du Bois’ page; “American educator, author, orator, and advisor,” reads Booker T. Washington’s. There is an absence of race within their nationality, which seemingly has become so customary in American culture. “African Americans” is standard, almost a sleight to the legitimacy of blacks in America, so the omission on Google becomes more pronounced—a welcome sign. It’s a perfect parallel to the work of American journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, whose crowning achievement is the New York Times’ 1619 project—a deep dive into the contributions of blacks to America and—more importantly—the role of slavery on modern American society. Within the various articles, essays and poems contained by her project, Jones delivers groundbreaking assertions in an attempt to reclassify African American history as American history.

In the first essay of the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones attacks the foundational principles of American democracy and argues that America’s true founders were the black Americans who have persisted throughout their subjugation since the early 18th century. Her argument centers around the fact that blacks, even after horrendous degradation, stuck their feet firmly in the soil of American culture and did as much as any whites to build the modern superpower. However, though Hannah-Jones’ argument has merit, her evidence—largely anecdotal—leaves too much room for the reader to be influenced by their own biases—falling short of affecting a broader audience and succeeding only in deepening the partisan divisions between ignorant and progressive Americans.

The main issue within Hannah-Jones’ evidence lies in its jaw-dropping impact, specifically when she dismantles the reputations of well-loved presidents. This is not to say that anything she says is inherently incorrect, but her most provocative evidence in the body is presented as almost entirely anecdotal with no source material. For example, in her argumentation about Abraham Lincoln and his plan to move blacks to another country following the emancipation of southern slaves, Hannah-Jones uses a third person view to tell the story of the meeting between Lincoln and five free black men—in a fashion that is most similar to storytelling. While emotionally tactile, Hannah-Jones does not pursue any further appeals with empirical evidence to strengthen her credibility in the telling of the narrative; this is her downfall. Almost immediately, the opposition to Hannah-Jones’ argument—namely those who maintain their patriotism and faith in American ideals—are turned off to her essay. Any intrigue felt from her opening anecdote about her father is squashed, and their biases take over. How dare Hannah-Jones desecrate the sanctity of a president held in as high regard as Lincoln? How dare she include the man responsible for freeing her ancestors? Even in ignorance, that response is warranted. Though Hannah-Jones uses a quote from Lincoln, it is immediately dismissed as outlandish because of her failure to include the source material.

Many proponents of Hannah-Jones’ argument may assert that the provided anecdotes and facts do not require the inclusion of source material because her target audience is already inclined to buy her version of history, as is. Therefore, the people reading can take her words at face value. Still others may say that—if her purpose is to intrigue this audience—the perceived strength of the story will be enough to have them research on their own. Although valid points, they are inherently flawed: in the interest of journalistic integrity, authors are supposed to cite source material when the evidence presented comes from an outside document, or exists beyond common knowledge. Anytime an author fails to do this, it leaves what should be concrete evidence up for interpretation, thereby weakening the evidence and the effectiveness of the argument. And besides, Hannah-Jones would be foolish to pander to a receptive audience. To write for those who already believe in her argument is not to argue at all. To write for one side is to lack a fundamental understanding of the opposition and to weaken one’s credibility—a practice commonly known as preaching to the choir.

It is utterly absurd to argue that Hannah-Jones crafted her essay without the intent to reach a broader audience than the roughly 13 percent of the American population who are black—assuming that all even agree with her—and the minority of more liberal whites. If this is her audience, then what case is Hannah-Jones trying to make—and to whom? What purpose is there in trying to convince a demographic that already acknowledges the extent of the degradation—that needs no convincing. Providing them with even more evidence is a pointless endeavor. It’s beating a dead horse; a waste of time.

In a 2020 interview with Atlanta Magazine, Hannah-Jones admitted, “I want everyone to read [the 1619 Project],” clearing up any misconceptions about a thin, targeted audience; furthermore, the language within her opening essay also points to a broader gallery. She frequently adheres to a straightforward and impassioned tone that never dips into scolding or shaming—so as not to blatantly offend—while still managing to plainly point the finger at the villains, many of whom are the ancestors of her detractors. Nevertheless, the lack of sourcing demonstrates that she may not completely understand this group of people, as in her attempt to appeal to the readers’ emotions, she loses the sympathy of the opposition as it transforms into diabolism and a deficit of faith in the argument. Something as simple as the lack of a source is enough for those ignorant audience members to refute the rest of the essay and, consequently, the project as a whole—not bothering to research for themselves. Critics are convinced that Hannah-Jones’ viewpoint is founded not on evidence but speculation and ideology. It’s a shame considering that in succeeding essays, quantitative data is given to support the emotional connection Hannah-Jones has to her topic. Regardless, the exhausting length and overwhelming passion of the introductory composition turns too many people away and leaves Hannah-Jones open to attack as it devolves into a mess of pathos and not-completely-sound partisan logic.

The 1619 Project is incredibly worthwhile. The depth and mastery at connecting the workings of the modern day with the systems of slavery is powerful and revolutionary, but there isn’t enough concrete evidence in its introduction to keep her opposition from lashing out. Understandably, Conservative America has an issue with the project, with former U.S. Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich summing up the animosity toward Hannah-Jones’ attempt to rectify history. In a tweet from August 2019, Gingrich states, “The NY Times 1619 Project should make its slogan ‘All the Propaganda we want to brainwash you with.’” (It is a republication of the original NYT Times motto.) Though clearly partisan, the reaction is foreseeable and—quite possibly—reasonable. Gingrich represents the demographic that will be most offended by the 1619 project’s assertions—white men. He likely read the opening of the project and found the evidence Hannah-Jones presents to be “propaganda” in the sense that it’s threatening to his identity. Especially in the era of the Lincoln anecdote, Hannah-Jones’ work can easily be interpreted as an attempt to change the perception of men traditionally perceived as progressive humanitarians—or to “brainwash” the population and slander the white man’s name... And this is why Hannah-Jones’ failure to cite her source comes back to bite. Even a short introduction like “A journal entry from...” would have been sufficient to delegitimize criticism like Gingrich presents,
Black people have right to claim America as their own

by Merrick Hoel

Throughout the American education system, teachers have taught us the subject of slavery and how it relates to the founding of this country through a one-sided and narrow lens — leaving room for students to question the accuracy of what is being taught in the classroom. Such assumptions are examined through the 1619 Project where Nikole Hannah-Jones denounces the textbook version of the portrayal of slavery within America and provides an alternative explanation on the nation’s founding. In the introductory part of the essay, Hannah-Jones uses anecdotal evidence about her father as the foundation of her argument to emotionally persuade her audience. She incorporates an overwhelming amount of evidence to solidify her argument. This essay effectively argues that I should continue to question the ways in which history is taught. Hannah-Jones proves to me that black people have the right to claim this nation as their own.

As Hannah-Jones introduces her argument, she questions her father’s decision of proudly hanging the American flag; this creates a personal connection for her readers. When she writes, “When I was young, that flag outside our house never made sense to me ... I didn’t understand his patriotism,” Hannah-Jones continues the use of familial accounts as the entryway into her depiction of America’s founding. Although there are other instances when she uses personal references such as telling the story of her grandmother cleaning white people’s houses, her father’s story proves to be most effective. Not only does it serve as a point of cohesion but it allows me to have a better understanding of her father’s experiences. If it were not for these anecdotes, her work would lack the pathos that she incorporated within her essay.

Because Hannah-Jones cannot understand her father’s love for a nation that looks down upon the black race, she seeks out answers through second-hand evidence. By creating a historical timeline of the black experience, she broadens her argument beyond her personal world to appeal to readers on a fact-based level. For example, she adds details about the slave trade, recounts the Dred Scott decision and describes the violence against blacks after Reconstruction. Highlighting this evidence and layering it throughout her work gives factual backing to her argument and shows her father’s patriotism stems from the perseverance of black people overcoming these events. This further persuades her readers about the inequalities ingrained within present society and reveals how much harder the black race has worked in a nation that never wanted them to succeed.

Some may argue that there is potential for certain audiences to find fault in Hannah-Jones’s line of reasoning as they believe she overuses anecdotal evidence and personal opinion. Those opposing her argument may add that she relies too heavily on her feelings and makes false assumptions without backing them up. When Hannah-Jones writes that, “without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different,” she creates a plausible statement which lacks proof. These generalizations may prevent some from buying into her claims. She could be faulted for overemphasizing the anecdote about her father when she makes statements such as “no person has a greater claim to that flag than us.” Due to other people’s understanding of American history, some may feel offended that she focuses only on her race as it relates to America’s development. Without facts, these examples reveal a flaw within Hannah-Jones’ work, which invites the question of her work’s credibility.

Conversely, it can be argued that the structure of Hannah-Jones’ essay does not fail to support her claim. Her Intentions were not to create a historical document supported only by statistics, but to help communicate the legacies of black history as it relates to her father’s patriotism. Except at the beginning and the ending of her essay, Hannah-Jones focuses entirely on the historical events as she creates conclusions made about the rights black people deserve. The middle of her essay is built on a chronology of facts from the past to present which she supports with multiple types of second-hand evidence including historical documents and figures. For example, she uses the Declaration of Independence to support her claim: “the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word.” Here, she uses irrefutable evidence to reinforce her point that the freedoms for black people were never explicitly addressed. Hannah-Jones cites historical documents as well as the points of view of historical figures, such as William Goodwill, Samuel Johnson, and Samuel Bryan. Using these resources, she forces the reader to consider such historical accounts and how they support her argument that there is a lack of acknowledgement of the accomplishments of black people. Instead of concluding that Hannah-Jones makes broad generalizations, her opponents should put their prejudices to the side and realize the harsh realities of history and the burden they place onto blacks in America.

Through her essay, Hannah-Jones presents a more accurate representation of the black experience beyond the textbook versions. Americans have been taught a narrow perspective of history from the dominant culture’s point of view. Therefore, Hannah-Jones uncovers the missing truths of the ripple effects of slavery and how it is impactful on today’s society. Readers such as myself benefit from a different perspective regarding the lack of recognition for the black community in America.
White racism continues in the American South because of past human slavery

by Franklin McCallie

There is a strong connection between present white racism in the American South and past enslavement of black human beings in America. I believe I can show evidence of that connection through my experience as a Southern white man, born in 1940, and that of my father, born in 1909.

By the time I was two or three years old, I had adopted the culture of racism I heard, saw, and experienced in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I knew who "colored" people were, versus revered white people. "Colored" was the accepted word of that period. My family's colored maid entered and left our home through the back door, never the front. White friends who entered the back door were mostly childhood playmates. "Clara" (not her name) was also assigned her own bathroom in the work area of our home. She was not to use ours. It is difficult to comprehend now that Clara helped raise me, bathed me, dressed me, and cooked my meals, but could not use my bathroom.

I cannot expound on the experience of our colored friends who came to visit my parents, because we had none. In fact, I knew of no white people in my parents' social sphere who had a black friend. I understood through osmosis that white people would have — should have — no black friends.

The only other colored people I knew in my childhood worked on the campus of my private boys' school of which my father was headmaster. "Coloreds" held janitorial, kitchen, or laundry positions. It was appropriate for me to interact with them, as with Clara, because the school campus was my home. My parents were courteous to all members of the staff, letting me know I could expect friendly treatment—from white and colored alike. However, I looked at least mild apprehension at colored persons in the wider community because of negative things said to and around me by my parents, extended family, classmates, parents of classmates, and members of my church.

I did not live in a social group which made wide use of the "N-word." I do not remember hearing my mother or father use that word. But I heard enough "N-jokes" through community contacts during childhood into teenage years that I was comfortable repeating several "N-jokes" myself. As a child, however, when I once called out the "N-word" to my brother, my father chided me: "That will embarrass Clara." At the time, I did not understand why I should be worried about embarrassing our colored maid. I respected her for the considerable power she had over me as our housekeeper and "nanny," but hurting Clara's feelings over this word did not concern me. At that time Clara was in her 30s; I was seven.

It is significant that Southern history during my young years was filled with the Civil War and the battle between our beloved Confederates and the hated Yankees. History books and magazines I saw were also filled with pictures of colored people as "slaves," owned by white people, working the cotton fields, living in crude shacks, and often being brutally whipped. These pictures were not hidden away. There were few, if any, photographs of colored people doing things considered important or for which they might be held in esteem by white people. (Ironically, which white child of the 1940s and 50s would understand the importance of black people picking the cotton that helped build our country's economics and energized international commerce?)

It is embarrassing, yet revealing, to admit that the words "colored" and "slave" were often attached in my thinking during my childhood years. Consciously or unconsciously, I did not see "colored" people as worthy of my consideration. I understood they were the descendants of slaves. The exception was "Uncle Remus." He was an ancient colored man whose stories delighted me; but then, maybe he had been a slave too.

I also witnessed colored men in prison uniforms with chains on their ankles, picking up trash along the road or cutting back undergrowth, while always being guarded by white prison officers with shotguns in their hands. I never forgot those mental pictures.

With that as background, it is not now surprising to remember that in 1954, I was shocked when my father announced to me at the age of 14 that "the Supreme Court of the United States has made the terrible mistake of ruling that colored children ought to attend school with white children." I cannot say that I actually thought the words, "the grandchildren of slaves" should be barred from going to school with me. But I felt certain my bias was influenced by the stain of slavery. I repeated back to my father, as if it were my own idea, "Yeah, that's terrible; that's wrong!"

I kept repeating that mantra aloud at my school, my church, and social circles until my junior year of college, 20 years of age. I was not vicious. I did not adhere to the KKK philosophy of violence, nor did my parents. But we were adamant about segregation. Segregation was the law of the land, and it was right, as my parents and church taught me. Through the Biblical story of Noah's cursing his son Ham, we were convinced that God had ordained that colored people would be the servants of white people through all time.

Following an honest and startling conversation with two students from a black college in 1961, I made a complete conversion from segregation to integration, changing the trajectory of my life. I chose to participate in the civil rights movement, and in 1968, I said to my father that I wanted to teach at the private school where I was raised and where he was still headmaster; however, he and the Board of Trustees must integrate the school. My father said he could not do that because, "Those people can't do our work." As we discussed the condition of black Americans, I heard in his tone and reasoning a belief that black people had not yet reached a level of full humanity. Listening at that point with a more sensitive ear, I was stunned. I heard a throwback to that long ago "3/5 of a human being" in the American Constitution. I left that meeting disheartened and greatly concerned about the effects of a long life of racism on my father.

A year and a half later, while teaching at the all-black public school at which I had been accepted, I heard that my father had experienced a change of heart. I went immediately to see him. As tears streamed down both of our faces, we hugged, and at
... at 60 years of age, he said to me: “I have been wrong about black people all my life; next year the Board of Trustees and I will integrate our school.”

60 years of age, he said to me: “I have been wrong about black people all my life; next year the Board of Trustees and I will integrate our school.” My father had completely reworked his view of how and why he had ever considered colored people as less than whole human beings. He admitted that day his children’s views had greatly influenced his change.

Today, the continuing “chain” of slavery is most easily witnessed where Southern whites still fly the Confederate flag. Those Confederate aficionados say that it indicates their “pride of heritage in their ancestors.” I’m not doubting that. But it’s also easy to believe those flags imply, as well, that the heritage of black people resides in their former condition of slavery. Most white people will not say that aloud. Some might not even recognize that unconscious thought.

The heavy load of “slavery” is difficult for black people to carry. It is equally heavy for many whites to jettison from their thinking. I am convinced that when referring to the ancestors of our black citizens, it is a significant detriment to black-white relations to speak of “slaves,” rather than “human beings who were enslaved.” I believe the only thing that will break those historical chains is face-to-face conversation between black and white. We must share our stories in order to build understanding and trust, thereby leading to mutual friendship and camaraderie. Only with that level of respect between black and white citizens will all Americans recognize that the enslavement of human beings stood as a total aberration against the concept of full humanity.

Civil Rights Act didn’t help when students wanted a burger and fries

by Franklin McCallie

The Howard School of Chattanooga Tennessee was established in 1865 to educate newly freed black children. In 1960, 30 Howard students “sat in” at a segregated lunch counter for the freedom to eat at any restaurant open to the public. Fifteen students were arrested and jailed. James Mapp, President of the Chattanooga Chapter of the NAACP, came with ball. A plaque now stands at Market Street and M. L. King Boulevard to commemorate these students’ courage. Few know, however, of the bravery of 50 other Howard students who faced their own rejection by white restaurant owners ten years later, even though Congress had by then banned racial discrimination in public accommodations through the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1970, Principal Clifford Hendrix requested that I, as Assistant Principal, chaperone the “spirit/cheering” bus for the football game against arch-rival Pearl High School in Nashville, Tennessee. On a Friday afternoon in October, we boarded our bus for Nashville. Fifteen minutes after crossing Monteagle Mountain, the bus blew a tire. The driver pulled off Interstate 24 beside a grassy area. Teacher/chaperone Joyce Gee took our students into the field to play games. The driver’s duty was to stay with the bus, so I hitchhiked with parents of Howard football players, luckily driving by, and asked to be dropped at a service station in Manchester, Tennessee. After four hours, the station owner located the right size tire in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

By then, the game was half over. Our students had been well-behaved and patient. I hated to say there would be no football for them. Their response: “We’re not worried about the game; we’re hungry!” With Manchester so close, this was a simple problem to solve. I requested the driver to stop at the first mom and pop burger joint he saw. Our students heard the jukebox inside and approached hungry and excited. Without warning, the outside lights went off; the door lock clicked. From inside, a loud voice boomed, “We’re closed!” Seeing the owner, I looked at my watch, indicating 8:15 p.m., and called back, “What time do you close?” He looked at his watch, “8:15!”

Disappointed, but without grumbling, the students returned to the bus. The driver found a second restaurant. This owner “closed” at 8:30 p.m. This time the students’ reaction revealed frustration and anger. “What’s going on, Mr. McCallie?” My response was honest and brief: “You know, and I know, but you’re going to get your burgers!”

I was afraid. I was “in charge” of this trip. These were my “white” people breaking the law against my “black” students whom I had promised a meal. I could call the Manchester sheriff and complain, and possibly be charged with attempting to cause a riot with 50 black teenagers. But arrest was not my fear. I feared I could not accomplish for these exemplary