

# Perspectives on The 1619 Project

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SUNY Potsdam

## Overview

By taking 1619, the arrival of African people at Jamestown, as the nation's symbolic origin, the *New York Times's* ambitious 1619 Project has sought to reframe American historical understanding, though not without generating criticism about its choice of evidence and broad claims about slavery's persistent legacy in American society. Together, our class examined a range of historical evidence to gauge the validity of the project's interpretive claims and its usefulness as a defining national narrative. For this exhibit, each class member created a poster that documents their own perspectives on these questions. The posters explore facts and interpretations about noteworthy events from 1600 to 1877, inviting viewers to join the conversation begun in our classroom. In coming to know the thoughts of our peers, we open a window into the dynamic relationship between existing academic thought and diverging popular views on early American history.



Nikole Hannah-Jones is the lead author of *The 1619 Project*

**“What happened in 1619, the tragic origin story unveiled throughout this book, set in motion the defining struggle of American life, between freedom and oppression, equality and racism, between the lofty ideals of democracy and the fight to make them real. We must confront this four-hundred-year war between these opposing forces, and then we must make a choice about which America we want to build for tomorrow. The time for slogans and symbolism and inconsequential actions has long passed. Citizens inherit not just the glory of their nation but its wrongs, too. A truly great country does not ignore or excuse its sins. It confronts them, and then works to make them right.”**

– Nikole Hannah-Jones

**“The 1619 Project is a mortal danger to the American experiment in self-government. If we want to keep the republic, then the task at hand—for those Americans who still share that hope, and that gratitude—is to face and defeat the threat. We must understand *The 1619 Project*: its divisive aims and its dishonest methods, its sweeping historical misjudgments and its blatant errors of fact. And we must drive its lies and its poisonous race-baiting out of our public institutions, beginning with the official curricula of our schools.”**

– Mary Grabar



Shackles from slavery days in the United States



John McWhorter is a vocal critic of *The 1619 Project*

**“This claim—that the American Revolution was not a revolution at all, but a counterrevolution waged to defend slavery—is freighted with enormous implications for American and world history. The denunciation of the American Revolution legitimizes the rejection of all historical narratives that attribute any progressive content to the overthrow of British rule over the colonies and, therefore, to the wave of democratic revolutions that it inspired throughout the world. If the establishment of the United States was a counterrevolution, the founding document of this event—the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed the equality of man—merits only contempt as an exemplar of the basest hypocrisy. How, then, can one explain the explosive global impact of the American Revolution upon the thought and politics of its immediate contemporaries and of the generations that followed?”**

– David North

**“The 1619 kind of perspective, for all of its elaborate terminology and moral passion vented in serious media organs and entertained by people with PhDs, demands that we abjure complexity. It is a call for dumbing ourselves down in the name of a moral crusade.”**

– John McWhorter

## Takeaways

Rather than take the 1619 Project as gospel truth, we used it as a vehicle for evaluating competing narratives of American history. Examining facts and interpretations new to us encouraged class members to consider perspectives we might not otherwise have considered. The course design invited a range of inquiries. It allowed us to explore how academic writing and popular thought shapes our understandings of history. It better equipped us to evaluate competing claims about historical “truths” and scholarly interpretations. And it underscored how political considerations shape public responses to historical knowledge. If *The 1619 Project* remains controversial, it has nonetheless proven that modern Americans continue to take an interest in the stories we tell ourselves about our shared national past.

**“#HowToBeAnAntiracist and The #1619Project should spark a conversation if not a clarion call for all of us to excavate our stories that have been buried, to find what has been lost, and see that our history is present and in plain sight.”**

– Maya Contreras

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