

Kaydence Ladison on The 1619 Project

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What's at Stake?

There is a lot at stake when debating The 1619 Project. If we follow its prescriptions, we should spend more time and be more critical about the ideals that made us who we are as a nation. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the chief author of The 1619 Project, states, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written; Black Americans have fought to make them true." A lot of people disagree with her claim and how she encourages us to think about American history. People say that she gets her facts wrong; that she is giving misleading information; and some even believe that what she is saying is dangerous. From my perspective, Hannah-Jones makes some good points in The 1619 Project when discussing the aspects of culture and how that helped make the colonies into the America we know today, but she also misrepresents the idea of freedom that comes out of the American Revolution. Throughout the Project, Hannah-Jones discusses how the enslaved people impacted the colonies, each in their own, individualized way. The examples provided either sustain or complicate Hannah-Jones's central thesis.

Indigenous People in Jim Crow America

Laura Feller's article "Being Indigenous in Jim Crow America" sustains the ideas that Hannah-Jones discusses in The 1619 Project. This article talks about how the enslaved people shared aspects of their cultures with one another. In her introductory essay to The 1619 Project, which we read for class, Hannah-Jones talks specifically about how culture shaped the colonies. Cultural mixing helped make the colonies what they are today. In a way, this article also complicates the ideas behind The 1619 Project. Hannah-Jones generally ignores Native American people, and this oversight causes her arguments to miss the diversity of the American experience. As we learned in the article about the descendants of the Pamunkey people who met John Smith, in Jim Crow Virginia Native people were trying to avoid being associated with African Americans. Racial hierarchies and categorizations forced Native people to accept racial categories enforced by white people.

Abigail Adams

The article the class read about the life of Abigail Adams complicates the ideas that were featured in The 1619 Project. This article discusses how John Adams's wife was very passionate for the United States gaining its independence. She believed that everyone deserved rights and she wanted the United States to gain its independence to help make this happen. She was a considerable advocate for women's rights and wanted them to have the same rights as men. This way of thinking applied to her feelings about slavery. She didn't want her own life dictated by someone else so she didn't believe that anyone should have been in the same situation. Abigail Adams also believed that you cannot have a nation without racial equality. If you do, you are missing levels of diversity that should be included. During her lifetime, many Northern states went to abolish slavery, but why? The Revolution was taken seriously, and enough people had said no to slavery after they realized the wrong inherent in the system they inherited.

"Welcome, or unwelcome, agreeable, or disagreeable, whether this shall be an entire slave nation, is the issue before us."

– Abraham Lincoln

William Henry Seward

The speech "The Irrepressible Conflict" that was delivered by William Henry Seward in 1858 refutes the ideas that are stated in The 1619 Project. Throughout the speech, there were a lot of points made about slavery and how negative it was. He didn't believe that the slave labor system was fair compared to the free labor system. He also discusses how inhumane slave labor was, as the slaves had little to no rights at all and the work was hard and dangerous. The reading about Abigail Adams points out that she believed a lot of the same things as Seward, and people like her wanted to start abolishing slavery. It wasn't possible to have one nation that supports both slavery and freedom, many people in the northern states believed. The Emancipation Proclamation that was put in place by President Lincoln made the nation an anti-slavery nation. He was pushed to do it during war time, but it did lead to the abolishment of slavery.



"I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in this province. It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me – to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

– Abigail Adams

Takeaways

The main takeaway for me from The 1619 Project is how slavery helped build the colonies, even though it was clearly a negative part of our nation's history. The 1619 Project helped improve my understanding of Early American history. Prior to learning about the Project in this class, I had never heard of it. This course allowed me to gain some beneficial knowledge about Early American history. I had the opportunity to look deeper at articles related to the topic and increase my critical thinking abilities.

Prior to coming to college, I didn't have a lot of knowledge about American History. When I was taking U.S. History in my junior year, my teacher sustained a severe injury and we didn't have a teacher for close to a month; and a few weeks later, then the COVID-19 pandemic effectively stopped my education. I feel that there is a value in being able to use deeper thinking skills during my college classes after not being able to use those skills throughout my secondary education.

I'm currently studying to become a teacher here at Potsdam. I have plans to become an elementary school teacher and with that comes teaching about history. I believe that teaching the next generation about history is crucial to ensure that history won't repeat itself. Teaching children is an absolute dream of mine and I want to make sure that they get the best education that they can from me as their teacher.