

Cassidy Welsh on The 1619 Project

HIST 201 Honors, Fall 2022

SUNY Potsdam

What is The 1619 Project & how did it affect history?

The 1619 Project's goal is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. The project's authors argue that the establishment of slavery in the British colonies was more formative to U.S. history than the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Reframing American history in this way allows us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the story. The project's lead author Nikole Hannah-Jones argues that the founding ideals of equality and liberty were "a lie." However, the reframing of U.S. history around slavery and racism continues to draw ferocious opposition. Still, the 1619 Project argues that the systemic racism that is slavery's legacy remains deeply rooted in every American institution and is still an ever-present factor in the lives of these minorities. 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.



Nikole Hannah-Jones – The 1619 Project's primary author

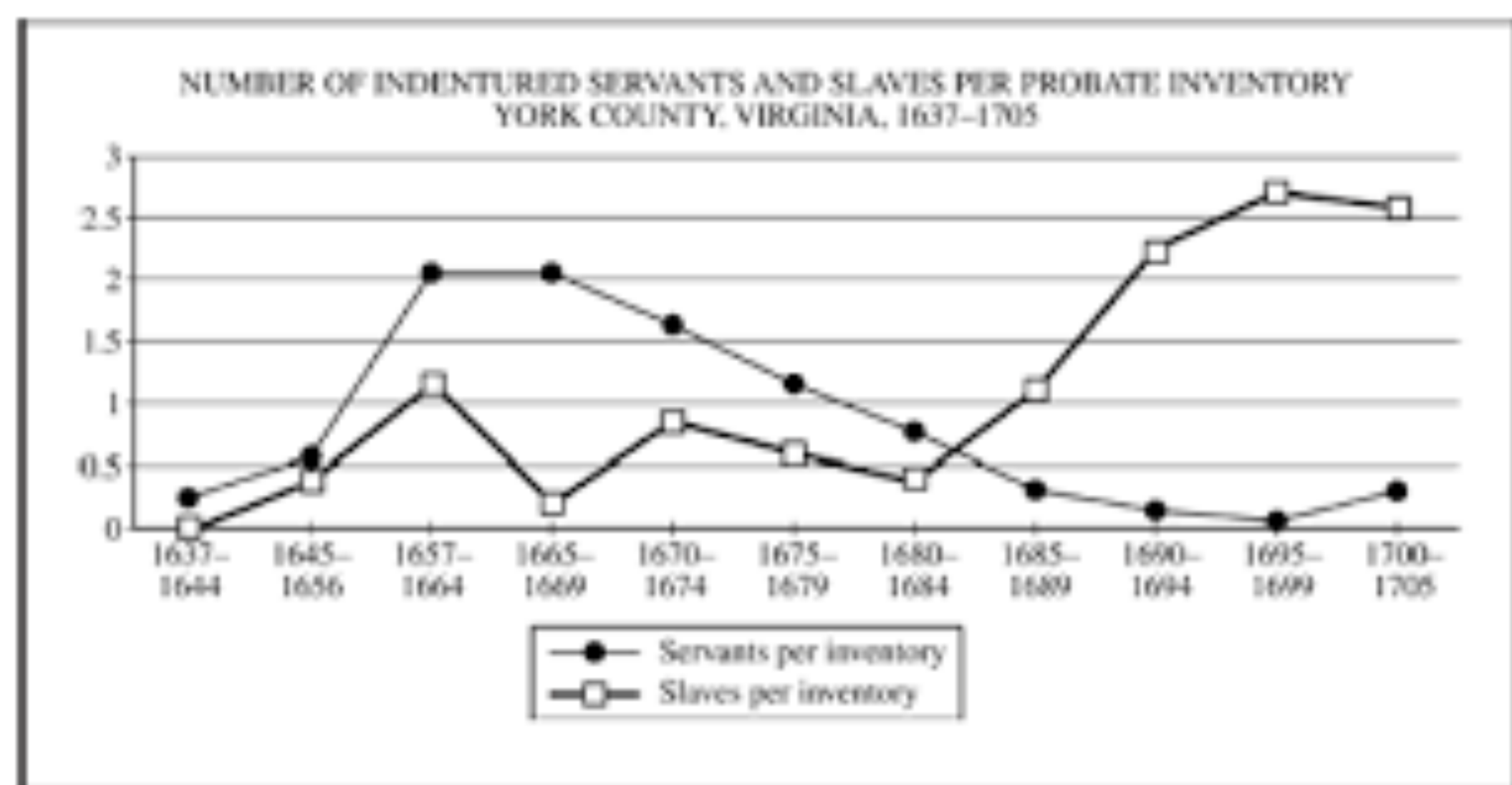
Indentured Servants – Paving the Way for Slavery

Another group that was persecuted by the Europeans and had a huge impact on the founding of the United States was indentured servants. Adult indentured servants usually served for four to seven years (children sometimes for much longer), with most working in the colonies' tobacco fields.

England demanded a large supply of tobacco, so the tobacco fields needed to produce vast quantities. It created substantial opportunities for planters, but because tobacco was a demanding, labor-intensive crop, it required many laborers. The work the indentured servants completed led to the sale of tobacco and helped the economy of British North America's Southern Colonies.

However, the Europeans were finding out that when the indentured servants' contracts were up, they were free to be landowners and decided to funnel out of the United States, which ultimately made the labor shortage worse. Thus, the Europeans started to transition from indentured European to enslaved African labor as the result of shifts in supply and demand conditions. Ultimately, it was the indentured servants who brought rise to slavery in the United States. According to an outside source titled: *Indentured Servants in the Colonial U.S.*, in South Carolina and Georgia, the black share of the population climbed from "18 percent to 41 percent in the same period." The indentured servants coming to America didn't have to work as long and could pay off their contracts quicker. With the increase in demand for workers rising, their wages were higher. This meant fewer years of service and their contract terms shortened. African slaves became more appealing to property owners because there was no contract, and they were bound to the land. It was the indentured servants who made the Europeans in America switch to slavery.

Hannah Nicole's 1619 project never mentions the role that the indentured servants had on the tobacco economy or how they started the increase of African Slavery. Servant and slaves alike were greeted with deadly diseases and often-harsh conditions that killed many newcomers and left the rest to the mercy of sometimes-cruel masters. This is just another example in which the thesis for the 1619 is **complicated**. The 1619 Project leaves out a big chunk of history that has made the United States into what it is today.



Indentured Servitude vs Slavery per probate in Virginia from 1637-1705

"Between the 1620s and the 1670s, the annual output of tobacco per hand rose from approximately 710 pounds to around 1,600 pounds" – Dr. Thomas Baker, distinguished professor at SUNY Potsdam

Abigail Adams – Women's Rights

Women were an influential minority group through the 1700 and 1800s. A major front-runner for women's rights during this time was Abigail Adams. She was also famous for her early advocacy of several inharmonious causes, including women's rights, female education, and the abolition of slavery. Yet Abigail Adams had to struggle her whole life with the limitations that society placed upon her dreams because she was a woman.

Abigail could never attend school because the New England schools at the time only admitted boys. Such limitations did not satisfy Abigail, and she began to educate herself by reading the books in her father's library. She vigorously supported education for women, writing to her husband John in 1778 that "you need not be told how much female education is neglected, nor how fashionable it has been to ridicule female learning." According to a National Historical Park biography, we can see that Abigail maintained and voiced strong opinions about the day's political issues and debates. She wrote at the time of her struggles to keep herself in check: "I have been so used to the freedom of sentiment that I know not how to place so many guards about me, as will be indispensable, to look at every word before I utter it, and to impose a silence upon myself, when I long to talk."

In a different biography we read, we may view all her ideas during a time when society was not asking, because she was a woman. She famously disagreed with her husband during the XYZ Affair, with Abigail thinking that war should be declared against France. Her influential ideals did not stop there; when we read about her life, we also saw she agreed with John Adams on the Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798.

Today, nearly two centuries after Abigail's death, her legacy survives in the letters she wrote, which are considered an important part of history. The memory of Abigail Adams is still present at the Adams National Historical Park, which serves as an invaluable resource for witnessing this woman's contributions to the nation through public service, something The 1619 Project never mentions. Its thesis is **complicated** because of this missing information.



Abigail Adams

Native Americans – During King Philip's War

Native Americans are another group that have also played a vital but neglected role in U. S. history.

The article "Why shall Wee have peace to bee made slaves: Indian Surrenderers during and after King Philips War" highlights the fact that Native Americans who surrendered during King Philip's War to avoid enslavement were themselves enslaved at nearly the same rate as Black Americans. Between 1492 and 1880, between "2 and 5.5 million Native Americans were enslaved in the Americas in addition to 12.5 million African slaves." (Fisher)

A second historical source, "The Myths of the Thanksgiving Story and the Lasting Damage They Imbue," by Claire Bugos, points out the fact that "The Native Americans have also lost so much history and people to slavery. Native Americans had been in the Americas for last 12,000 years, since the beginning of time." The Europeans thought that the arrival of the Mayflower was the first contact between the Wampanoags and Europeans. However, there is proof that Wampanoags had already been to Europe and back. The contact between the Europeans and the Wampanoags people was bloody, and it involved slave raiding by Europeans. When Wampanoag leader Ousamequin reached out to the English at Plymouth and wanted an alliance, it was not because he was being friendly. It's because he needed help. His people had been devastated by an epidemic disease brought over by the Europeans. The Thanksgiving that we all celebrate today doesn't talk about this. It doesn't discuss that this was followed eventually by one of the most horrific colonial Indian wars, King Philip's War. This holiday also doesn't address the Wampanoag survival and adaptation that they had to overcome over the centuries due to the Europeans taking over their land.

This example **complicates** the thesis of The 1619 Project because nowhere in Hannah-Jones's essay does she describe or even mention the Native Americans' effect on the founding of the United States.



Wampanoags were attacked by European settlers.

"5.5 million Native Americans were enslaved in the Americas in addition to 12.5 million African slaves" – Dr. Linford D. Fisher, distinguished professor at Brown University

Takeaways

All in all, when the information is taken together, the thesis of **The 1619 Project is complicated and can be challenged** today.

The 1619 Project by Nikole Hannah-Jones states specifically that Black Americans were the founders of the United States democracy. However, we can see here that there were many other groups that were also persecuted and had a large share in shaping the United States into what it is today. The Native Americans, Indentured Servants, and Abigail Adams are just a few of the many forerunners in early America who helped shape the United States into what we know today.

If the 1619 Project had essays that talked about the contributions from the other groups of people in early America that were enslaved and made a difference, then the thesis would be perfect. However, there is no mention of any other group except Black Americans, and for that reason The 1619 Project thesis is incomplete.