



## 375 YEARS AGO: WHEN BLACKS CAME TO AMERICA - A FORGOTTEN PIECE OF OUR NATION'S PAST - 1619 ARRIVAL OF BLACKS LEFT OUT OF HISTORY

**Newspaper**

**August 14, 1994 | Daily Press (Newport News, VA)**

**Author: RICHARD STRADLING and BENTLEY BOYD Daily Press | Page: A1 | Section: Local**

Bill Wiggins gets a funny feeling in his gut when he stands at Fort Monroe and looks out across the harbor and Chesapeake Bay.

"It is both a feeling of ambivalence and nostalgia," said Wiggins, a Hampton University historian.

It was here, in 1619, 375 years ago this month, that the first black people are thought to have arrived in British North America.

The two dozen or so men and women were eventually taken up the James River to the fledgling English settlement at Jamestown, where they likely worked as indentured servants - not as slaves - and where some eventually gained their freedom.

"That was a seminal event," Wiggins said. "That was the beginning of a relationship, as well as a status, for a group of people that has affected their existence down to the present time."

Next weekend, the 375th anniversary of the arrival of blacks in Virginia will be commemorated with events at Jamestown and Hampton University. The most extensive

will take place Saturday at the Jamestown Settlement Museum, where musicians, artists, scholars and politicians will celebrate African-American heritage throughout the day.

There is a shadow over these commemorations. What followed the arrival of blacks in the colonies - slavery, racism and repression - makes the 1619 landing, in some respects, an ill-omened event, not something to celebrate.

But Wiggins and other historians say it is important not to forget when and under what circumstances blacks first came to this part of the world.

"The recovery of these early events, shadowy though they are, is a part of recovering the whole black presence in American culture," said Thad Tate, a history professor emeritus at the College of William and Mary.

What historians know for certain about the arrival of the first blacks in Virginia is limited to a few lines in a letter.

In late 1619 or early 1620, John Rolfe of the Virginia Company wrote a letter to his boss in England that mentions a Dutch ship landing at Point Comfort - now Old Point Comfort, where Fort Monroe stands - carrying "not any thing but 20 and odd Negroes." Rolfe's letter says the ship arrived "about the latter end of August."

Williamsburg historian Dylan Pritchett believes the significance of the 1619 arrival is overblown, thanks to early English historians who recorded events from an English perspective. Some historians believe Africans may have arrived in North America before 1619, with the Spanish explorers in Florida and South Carolina in the 1500s, but that no one bothered to record it.

"1619 is a date that has been put down simply because it fills out the 1607 story and the connection with Jamestown," said Pritchett, who will lead a historical discussion Saturday at Jamestown. "All the other black folk that were here don't fit into the English and their attitude, 'Everything began with us.' Blacks prior to 1619 weren't validated because they didn't have that piece of paper."

The time and circumstances of the arrival of first blacks in Virginia are not widely known among Americans of any race.

"Unfortunately, and to my chagrin," said Wiggins, "I have found over the years - and being here in Hampton is no exception - most of the students who take their first African-American history course know nothing about this event."

Mary Feagin didn't know. Feagin, of Newport News, is a Hispanic woman raising three young sons whose father is African-American. She wants them to know both their

Hispanic and African-American heritage, and she sees the anniversary commemoration as a good place for them to learn.

"There's a lot of African-Americans that do not know their heritage," she said. "And I think it's important that African-American children know what their past is."

Valerie Taylor, Jamestown Settlement's marketing director and an organizer of next weekend's events, said she was discouraged to discover how many people didn't know about the arrival.

"When I talked to a lot of my friends about this, they didn't have a clue," Taylor said. "And these are college-educated people."

Michael Sams said he emphasized the events of 1619 when he taught a fourth-grade class in North Carolina in the late 1970s. "It's one of those dates I had my kids remember," Sams said. "And I'm not big on dates."

But Sams, who now teaches government at Lafayette High School in James City County, said the first blacks tend to get lost in high school American history courses.

"We see it as important because it's an important part of Virginia history," he said. "But in a survey course, it's less talked about. I think it depends on where you are. If I'm teaching in Idaho, what impact does that have on me? There were no slaves in Idaho."

Tommy Bogger, a Norfolk State University history instructor, says many of his students are aware of the arrival in 1619. But he is disappointed that most of them simplify African-American history and equate that date with the beginning of slavery in the region.

"So often it has been ingrained into them that one thing necessarily follows another. They have a set of facts," said Bogger, who is the university's archivist. "I try to show them that history is not that simple, that there are little gray areas in between. There are some things we just don't know."

Though Rolfe's letter says the blacks were traded for provisions, they were probably not slaves. Rather, historians believe, they were indentured servants who, like European indentured servants of the time, probably gained their freedom after working for several years.

"They probably did not fare any worse than the white indentured servants who were coming over at that time," said Gerrold Roy, a history instructor at Hampton University.

Some historians also believe those first blacks found themselves in a relatively colorblind society. Some gained their freedom and bought land. There were no laws against interracial marriage.

"They seemed not to have any particular concern about color, and that is something that I suspect that too many European Americans have no knowledge of," said the Rev. Vincent Hodge of West Point.

But there is evidence that the treatment of blacks began to change by the 1630s. Wiggins notes specifically a 1640 court case involving three indentured servants - one black, two white - who had run away. The two whites had four years added to their servitude, Wiggins said, while the black man was told he had to serve for the rest of his life.

That the first blacks in British North America probably were not slaves is both surprising and important to some people. Dovie Lacy and her husband, Karl, brought their two daughters from Cleveland to visit black history exhibits at Colonial Williamsburg. The Lacys were not aware of the 1619 arrival, and when she did learn of it, Mrs. Lacy was wary of how the anniversary would be marked.

"Unless you point out that not all were slaves, it's not something to celebrate," she said.

That distinction and the fact that the black people did not willingly submit to their bondage, as white indentured servants did, means that blacks today can look with pride on the 1619 arrival, said Richmond civil rights lawyer Oliver Hill said .

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Hill said. ``We didn't do anything we have to be ashamed of. The enslavers did."

To Wiggins, the real tragedy of the black experience in North America was not the initial arrival in 1619, but the subsequent development of slavery, which was not recognized by law in Virginia until the 1660s. Wiggins said he sees the early history of blacks in America as a missed opportunity.

"Those first individuals were not slaves at that point in time, so we have to keep asking ourselves why they were made slaves," he said. ``And we keep coming back to the fact that the decisions to make them slaves were made very carefully."

Making the distinction between the first blacks and the later slave trade has always been a challenge for those who would remember 1619.

In 1969, on the 350th anniversary, some 1,500 people, mostly black, attended a Sunday ceremony at what is now Jamestown Settlement. The featured speaker, Samuel Proctor Sr., dean of Rutgers University's graduate school of education, called the mere survival of blacks in North America the "miracle of the ages."

Hill, who organized that event, said there were mixed feelings in the black community about the commemoration. One of the biggest critics was a freshman state senator named Doug Wilder.

"Even Doug said I was wrong," Hill said. "People said I was celebrating slavery. It generated all kinds of negative attitudes. I wasn't celebrating slavery. The first Africans was a historical event. I was commemorating the beginning like it was any other historical event."

Wilder has changed his thinking. He will host Saturday's events at Jamestown Settlement. He has even formed a foundation to raise money to build a national slavery museum somewhere near Jamestown, though little is being done while the foundation waits to receive tax-exempt status - and Wilder campaigns for the U.S. Senate.

Raising money for black history research was Hill's goal 25 years ago and was a key to Joyce Hobson's plans for this year.

Hobson, a Hampton school teacher and the first black woman appointed to the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation Board of Trustees, spent two years trying to convince the other trustees to back an ambitious anniversary observance.

Hobson proposed a five-day event, including education and political summits, a crafts fair, a celebrity golf tournament, a documentary and concerts to raise money for a statue of the first blacks. She also urged the trustees to build a new museum wing for exhibits on the first years of blacks in the Jamestown settlement.

Foundation Chairman L. Ray Ashworth said Hobson's plans were too extravagant and would have cost \$434,000. Instead, he endorsed a one-day event suggested by the museum staff.

The disagreement between Ashworth and Hobson escalated to the point where she called him "racially calloused." Eventually, representatives of then-Gov. Wilder convinced Hobson to scale her plans back to a one-day event.

Hobson refused to comment about this weekend's commemoration.

The foundation spent about \$32,000 on Saturday's festival and has raised \$9,000 in donations to defray the cost, said Taylor.

There are no plans to raise money for a new museum wing or a statue, Taylor said, but that could come later.

"Our goal is to spark in some of the young people an interest in the questions surrounding 1619, so that they become the historians and educators that can answer some of these question marks," Taylor said.

But Hill is disappointed that this week's event will likely fail, as his 1969 event did, to deliver a solid financial boost to black history research.

"I wanted to set up a foundation to have something more permanent, to develop some funds and set up some money for scholars," Hill said. "I don't know, maybe we'll get something done by 2019."

The commemoration of the arrival of the first blacks in British North America is not unlike other important but troubling historic events, Tate said. Christopher Columbus' landing in 1492, he noted, marked the arrival of whites in the Western Hemisphere but also signaled the beginning of the near-eradication of the native people of North America.

"I think some kind of observance is quite appropriate," Tate said. "But you're not celebrating."

Ramziddin El-Amin, a history major at Virginia State University in Petersburg, agreed.

"I say it should be celebrated not like a party or anything, but a memorial service," said El-Amin. "A dignified memorial service."

If there is something to celebrate on this anniversary, it is the accomplishments of those first "20 and odd" blacks and those who followed, said Edna Medford, a Charles City County native who teaches history at Howard University in Washington.

"You can't ignore the negative side of it," Medford said. "It was not an ideal thing for Africans, to be ripped from their homes and their families to be brought here. But once having arrived, I think the emphasis has to be put on the contributions that they made."

Paul Hargrove of Hampton agrees. Hargrove, 25, heads a group of teen-agers called Young People Against Violence. He believes blacks could have a more positive outlook for the future if they had a better understanding of their past.

"The important part of the observance is the ability to see all the past accomplishments and struggles that blacks have gone through in the country," Hargrove said. "I think we often forget the past and bring up the negative."

White Americans also would benefit from a better understanding of African-American heritage, said Sherman Holmes, a member of a committee putting together a book of black history in Middlesex County. Holmes recalled meeting a white woman who said she didn't realize that there were once slaves in Virginia.

"Everybody should know their history," he said.

Jamestown's Taylor agreed.

"I hope people don't think this is just a 'black thing,' " she said. ``It's cultural awareness. I would hope every American would be interested in sharing the experience of a co-American."

The anniversary of the landing at Point Comfort in 1619 usually passes unnoticed. The Jamestown museum has not formally observed it since Hill's commemoration 25 years ago, Taylor said.

But some people do remember the anniversary. The Rev. James Hargett of San Diego has held ceremonies every August, beginning with a sunrise service on the deck of one of the recreated ships at Jamestown Settlement in 1984.

This year, Hargett is bringing a busload of members of his church from California for another sunrise service, this one near the site of the Point Comfort landing.

"It just seemed logical that we would have that service as near that port as possible," Hargett said. ``That is the moment we will be mourning the dreadful circumstances that led to our diaspora, our dispersal. That is the moment of authentic lamentation."

But there is room for optimism on this anniversary, said Wiggins. After all, he said, the 1619 group's descendants are free.

One of those descendants is Carol Tucker Jones, of Hampton, who can trace her family back to William Tucker, the first black born in the Virginia colony.

Jones will be one of the 20 dignitaries riding on the ship that will land at Jamestown Settlement on Saturday.

"I am looking forward to it. I'm excited. I cannot be depressed by it," she said. ``It's history, and you can't erase history."