

**Carter G. Woodson Park, Washington, D.C.:** In the Shaw neighbourhood, a triangular park and a bronze sculpture of Woodson seated on a circular stone memorial commemorate his legacy.

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(CNN)2019 marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of 19 enslaved Africans, brought to mainland English North America for the first time. The Africans who disembarked in Jamestown were captives stolen first by Portuguese slave traders and then by English pirates who sold them into bondage in what would become the United States of America. This scene ultimately set the stage for more aggressive entrees into a global slave market by England and, over time, America.



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Jamestown, and its subsequent legacy, represents the racial origin story of what would become our nation. The subsequent four centuries have produced a long struggle for citizenship, equality and freedom for African-Americans that continues into the present but remains rooted in the nation's original sin of racial slavery. In 2019, slavery's aftermath hovers over contemporary American race relations in deep and profoundly disturbing ways – including how [textbooks attempt](#) to ignore the unsavory parts of this history, going so far as to characterize enslaved Africans brought to American shores as "workers" in a misguided effort to sanitize this painful chapter in our national story.



An engraving shows the arrival of a Dutch slave ship with a group of African slaves for sale in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619.

Against this backdrop, Black History Month in 2019 takes on acute importance; this anniversary is a sharp reminder that our history cannot and must not be euphemized. Each February, Black History Month subverts conventional narratives of American history by centering the grandeur and travails of the black freedom struggle. Black lives mattered in 1619, to the extent that they facilitated the creation of the world's most expansive industrial and consumer economy – riches that were built on the unpaid labour of African-Americans.

While the history of black people descended from the African diaspora is global and spans millennia, 2019 is significant because the past 400 years represent a crucial, though long misunderstood and misrepresented history. The black presence in British North America proved to be the single most important ingredient to the creation of what would become the United States of America and the modernization of global capitalism. Racial slavery and the degradation of black lives proved to be the elixir that fostered dreams of freedom, democracy, wealth creation and the pursuit of happiness for white men.

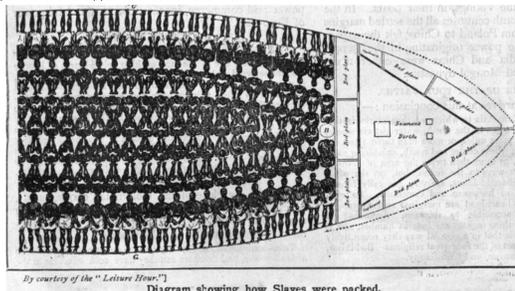


Diagram showing how Slaves were packed.

Circa 1750, this diagram shows how slaves were packed into the hull of a ship. A majority of Americans still resist this history, despite the heroic efforts of pioneering black scholars and activists, most notably Carter G. Woodson, the Harvard-trained historian [who founded](#) the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 and Negro History Week, 11 years later. Expanded to Black History Month in the wake of the Black Power Movement, its significance has grown, thanks to the explosion of black studies programs and departments at major colleges and universities, the growth of Kwanzaa celebrations by millions of African-Americans and the increased interest in black popular culture prompted by racial progress – and the obsessions spawned by persistent anti-black racism. Politics and pedagogy inspired the movement to study black history. Narratives of American history after the Civil War used racist history as a weapon. Before the invention of "fake news," stalwarts of the defeated Confederate States of America innovated what might be called "fake history."



American historian and educator Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950) is pictured in this image from the 1910s.

These histories spun Reconstruction as an unfair assault on white supremacy, an attack on white womanhood, and a betrayal of democratic values that elevated unqualified blacks to elective office only to be driven out by the heroic actions of Klansmen and white supremacists. The same year Woodson founded the most venerable historical association for the study of black life in American history, D.W. Griffith released the film "The Birth of a Nation," a nakedly racist and technologically ambitious retelling of Reconstruction that cast white actors in blackface seeking to rape and assault virtuous white women only to be quelled by racial terrorists reimagined as patriots. The film dazzled many, including President Woodrow Wilson, who [screened](#) the silent era's first cinematic blockbuster at the White House.

While American presidents no longer screen such racist films in the White House, our present leader is [content to traffic](#) in [contemporary racial anxieties](#) that echo those depicted in "The Birth of a Nation" over a century ago.



[Is it time to revisit Black History Month?](#)

Blackface and cultural nostalgia and admiration for Confederate flags, the Ku Klux Klan and other symbols of white supremacy continue to capture the American imagination, most often to the great detriment of the pursuit of racial equality and the protection of black lives. Calls for Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam [to resign](#) in the wake of allegations that he dressed in blackface are rooted in a larger reality that the nation stubbornly refuses to confront.

Too many white Americans remain in the thrall of white supremacy and anti-black racism that is the direct byproduct of racial slavery and a still potent caste system that marks black bodies – by virtue of their skin colour – as objects of systemic exploitation, ritualized violence and cultural derision. The politics of racial disfranchisement that began during slavery continues into 2019 with the [practice of voter suppression](#); it is a reflection of a society that still [has yet to come to terms](#) with its history.

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Black History Month remains more relevant now than ever, precisely because of its insistence on presenting an unvarnished look at American history. Yet many people seem to have either missed or purposefully ignored this important message. The good, bad and ugly parts of this history cohere in the astounding juxtapositions of racial progress alongside racist tragedies. That history, at its best, is less invested in the single heroic achievements of "Great Black Women and Men" and more

concerned with the lived reality of black everyday lives, the ordinary black folk whose courage, resilience and intelligence guided the transformation from slavery to freedom and in the process helped to reimagine American democracy.