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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol6/iss1/9

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The 1676 Project: Black and White Together in the U.S.A.

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America’s post-George Floyd racial reckoning has brought a new focus on the country’s history of enslavement, segregation and systemic racism. However, this reckoning has often failed to recognize that the roots of systemic racism lie in the need of the wealthy planters in colonial Virginia to divide the African and English indentured servants who constituted a majority threatening to elite power. Nor do contemporary versions of U.S. history always account for the persistent reoccurrence of class-based interracial movements, such as the late 19th century Populists, or their promise as a long-term solution to the country’s racial divides.

The year 2020 was widely described as a year of “racial reckoning” in the United States, a time when, following the video-recorded murder of George Floyd, much of the country, especially in its white population, finally began to seriously face the reality of systemic racism. Derek Chauvin could murder George Floyd, on camera, without apparent concern for the consequences because he had every reason to believe it would be OK.

That was a well-founded belief on his part. It was based not just on Chauvin’s personal record of excessive force complaints that never damaged his career (Lartey & VanSickle, 2021), or on the justice system’s failure to convict white police officers in other well-publicized killings of Black people (Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, et alia). Chauvin’s presumption of impunity also had behind it more than 150 years of lynching, terror, brutality and mass incarceration, and, before that, more than 200 years of kidnapping and enslavement. For 300 years, people like Derek Chauvin had been the crew on the slave ships, the plantation overseers, the slave catchers, the nightriders, and, eventually, the police officers and prison guards. They did the dirty work of white supremacy, and it had always been OK.

Then, suddenly, in June 2020 it wasn’t.

We all know what happened during and since the George Floyd summer. There were demonstrations and uprisings. Police reform legislation passed in some places and failed in others. There were lawsuits and trials, and more police killings despite it all. However, a big part of America’s reckoning has been a matter of coming to terms with how we got here. What in our history led us to this day when George Floyd is in the ground, and Derek Chauvin is behind bars? On that front, in the past two years, many monuments to the racist past have been removed; some public places have been renamed, and some school history curricula have been revised.

As part of this process of coming to terms with our past, Americans have been urged to consider the possibility that white supremacy is not an aberration in the American story, but rather that it is the story itself. This was the thesis of The New York Times 1619 Project. Launched in August 2019 as a special issue of the Times Magazine, the project commemorated the 1619 arrival of the first Africans in the territory that would become the United States. A Times blurb for the project stated boldly, “American slavery began 400 years ago this month. This is referred to as the
country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s true origin” (The New York Times, 2019).

However, as we will see, slavery and white supremacy in America did not begin in 1619. Instead, those grim realities emerged over the course of several decades in the later 1600s as the strategy used by large landowners to divide Black and white workers whose unity posed a threat to elite dominance. This understanding, furthermore, is key to any real and substantial reckoning with America’s ongoing racial divisions and the forces that feed them.

**The 1676 Project**

American racism did begin to take living shape in the 1600s in the Virginia colony. And by the end of that century, the features of white supremacy as we would come to know it were recognizable. However, it didn’t start that way, and it didn’t have to end that way. For one thing, as the eminent African American historian, Nell Irvin Painter, wrote in *The Guardian* (2019), “People were not enslaved in Virginia in 1619, they were indentured. The [first] Africans were sold and bought as ‘servants’ for a term of years, and they joined a population consisting largely of European indentured servants, mainly poor people from the British Isles.”

In her introduction to The 1619 Project, its editor, Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote, “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country” (2019). However, in 1619, it was not written in the sky, or in anyone’s DNA, that Africans in America would occupy a special category of subhuman servitude. As Painter noted, when the first Africans arrived in Virginia, they took their places in a society with varying degrees and conditions of servitude—none of them based on color. But by the end of the seventeenth century, Virginians of African descent did occupy a separate category in which dark skin color was identified with lifelong slavery. To understand white supremacy in America, we have to understand how that happened. It was during that century that skin color, rather than religion or economic class, started to become the main dividing line in American society.

At first in the Virginia colony, people of different colors acted according to their economic interests as servants and masters. Of the white people doing physical labor in the Virginia colony in 1619, almost none were free. Tobacco was the colony’s main crop. Tobacco production requires a lot of hard manual work, and volunteers to do it were in short supply. So most ordinary Virginians arrived from the British Isles as indentured servants. They served a term in bondage (usually seven years) and were set free at the end. These people were shipped out of British debtors’ prisons or sold themselves in return for passage to the New World. The term of bondage was often extended if an indentured servant violated an ever-growing list of rules in the colony’s “servant code,” but the presumption of both master and servant was that someday the servant would go free.

Lifelong slavery existed in the Virginia colony before the Africans arrived, but British law reserved it for non-Christians or “heathens.” Before 1619, this applied exclusively to the native Indians. Afterward, it also applied to some Africans. But in the 1600s, even slavery for life was not as harsh an institution as it would become in Virginia. Slaves could own, buy, and sell livestock. They could work for wages and use the proceeds to buy their freedom. One 1646 Virginia court case required a slave’s permission before he could be sold.
In the early days, some African slaves were freed when they converted to Christianity. Some other Africans came into Virginia as indentured servants under the same terms as their British, Scottish, or Irish counterparts, and some of them became free at the end of their terms. Once Africans were free, they became full members of the community. They owned property and even servants. There are recorded cases of intermarriage between Blacks and whites. Undoubtedly, there was racial prejudice and private discrimination in the early days of the Virginia colony, but there was no separate, race-based legal status for Blacks. Yet by 1691, Virginia had passed a law against interracial marriage, a clear indication that the status of Blacks had changed for the worse.

What happened in the last half of the seventeenth century to so radically and quickly change the legal status of Blacks? The explanation lies in the servants’ revolts that shook the Virginia colony in the 1660s and 1670s. By the 1660s, the Virginia colony was developing a major servant problem—what to do with them once they were free. The colonial legislature made the “servant code” stricter to help masters lengthen the terms of servitude. This angered many servants, but it didn’t solve the systematic problem. Even the most unruly and unlucky servant would eventually be freed. The freed servants couldn’t be shipped back to England. They weren’t wanted there. That’s why they’d come to Virginia in the first place. So they were turned loose, without resources or prospects, and, not surprisingly, they caused trouble.

The freed servants wanted land, but increasingly the land along the coastal plain was already claimed. When former servants moved on to Indian lands to the West, they provoked Indian attacks on both themselves and long-established settlers. Then the freedmen demanded that British soldiers come to protect their inland settlements from the Indians. But in those days the British army was busy with a revolution and a civil war back home.

As the number of servants grew with the passing years, so did the problems and so did their discontent. In 1663, a group of servants in Gloucester County began meeting at Mr. Knight’s tavern, a place frequented by whites and blacks of the laboring class. They began complaining about their plight—especially about the ever-lengthening terms of service for the slightest infractions of the servant code. The men ended up planning definitive action. Nine of them entered an agreement to collect weapons and recruit others with the aim of launching a revolt. They planned to meet at a designated spot on September 13, 1663, and begin marching across the countryside to Jamestown. They expected to seize more weapons as they went and recruit additional soldiers from the plantation servants and slaves. Eventually they planned to besiege the governor in Jamestown and demand freedom for all servants and slaves.

The plot was stopped by an informer. But its seriousness can be judged from the reaction of the Virginia legislature. The informer was rewarded with 5,000 pounds of tobacco. The four chief leaders of the planned revolt were executed. The House of Burgesses, a legislative body dominated by the landed elite, designated September 13 as an annual day of thanksgiving that the revolt had been averted.

But the feared revolt wasn’t averted; it was only postponed. It arrived in 1676, when a young planter named Nathaniel Bacon took up the cause of the former servants who had taken over inland land claims. At first, their demand was for stronger action against the indigenous people of that area. Then Bacon and the small freeholders took up arms against the native people themselves.
But from the beginning, mixed in with the small farmers’ anti-Indian sentiments was real and righteous anger at the growing inequality and corruption of the colonial social order.

As Bacon put it, “The poverty of the country is such that all the power and sway is got into the hands of the rich who . . . having the common people in their debt have always curbed and oppressed them.” On another occasion, Bacon called the colony’s “great men in authority” a collection of “sponges [who] have sucked up the public treasures.”

When no relief or reform was forthcoming from the rulers of the colony, Bacon left some of his men to continue fighting the Indians in the West while he led another armed group in a march on Jamestown. There Bacon’s army ousted the governor and temporarily seized control of the colony. The governor counterattacked with 1,000 British troops, and Bacon called all his men in from the frontier to focus on the fight with Virginia’s elite. Needing more troops to counter the British, Bacon proclaimed freedom for all slaves and servants who joined his army. The governor had earlier tried this tactic, but no bondsmen had heeded the call. But hundreds of servants and slaves from throughout the colony flocked to Bacon’s cause and made it their own.

For several weeks during the summer of 1676, a biracial army of indentured servants, slaves, and poor white farmers marched through the Tidewater section of Virginia, looting the homes of the wealthy planters and recruiting plantation slaves and servants to join the fight. A battle that had begun around the narrow interests of a small section of what we would call the “lower middle class” had turned into a revolutionary movement to abolish all forms of forced labor and unearned privilege. For a moment, it seemed possible that Virginia might be the birthplace of the world’s first multiracial cooperative commonwealth.

Then the tide turned. Bacon got sick and died, but the leaderless army of the poor fought on. The British sent reinforcements and heavier weaponry. Finally a British gunship sailed up the York River for a final assault on the movement’s garrison. Four hundred men were there. Most of them surrendered for fear of the cannon fire and under false promises of freedom. A small group of eighty Blacks and twenty whites fought on until they ran out of ammunition.

Bacon’s Rebellion represented the turning point in the evolution of race-based slavery and the ideology of white supremacy that came with it. The planters realized that indentured servants would not provide the stable, secure supply of cheap labor that they needed. Since earlier attempts to enslave the Indians had failed, that left the African slave trade as the only alternative. Planters began to import more Black African slaves, and their legislature passed the anti-miscegenation law. Africans were consigned to an inferior “other” category based not on religion, or even condition of servitude, but purely on skin color.

At the same time, the colony took measures to improve the lot of freed white servants. In 1705, a new law guaranteed all freed servants severance pay in the form of ten bushels of corn, thirty shillings in cash, a gun, and fifty acres of land. So the commonality of interest between lower-class whites and Blacks was broken. They were divided and separated along racial lines. The poor whites were given material incentives to identify with the “big men” of the colony as their allies and protectors against the Blacks. And so it has remained in America for three hundred years.
In his concerts in the 1980s, singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen would sometimes talk about the petty trappings of middle-class American consumerism as a sort of consolation prize for the loss of genuine democracy. He half-joked that all of it—the suburban houses, the second and third cars, the boats, the home entertainment systems—was a “booby prize,” a poor substitute for real power and real equality. Especially for lower-income white people, the privilege of “whiteness”—simply being “better” than the Blacks—has been chief among those booby prizes.

The white indentured servants of Virginia were the first to be offered the booby prize, and they eagerly took it. The alternative, after all, had been crushed beneath a hail of cannonballs.

But the 1676 Project didn’t die with Nathaniel Bacon. Throughout American history, despite all odds, poor and working class Americans with different racial identities have come together and worked shoulder to shoulder for their common economic interests and in service of their commonly held values, defying the forces that would drive them apart.

“Separately Fleeced”

When slavery finally ended in 1865, Black people in the South were able to attend school, vote and hold public office, but land remained in the hands of the plantation owners and economic conditions never improved for the former slaves, or for poor whites. A severe economic depression in 1877 began to spur impoverished small farmers in the South to action. That year in Texas a group of farmers formed the first Farmers Alliance. By 1886, 100,000 farmers had joined in 2,000 Alliance chapters. They formed buyers’ and sellers’ cooperatives which helped farmers negotiate lower prices for their supplies and higher prices for their produce. Black farmers organized into a parallel “Colored Alliance.” An editorial in an Alabama Alliance newspaper read, “The white and colored alliance are united in their war against the trusts, and in promotion of the doctrine that farmers should establish cooperative stores and manufactures . . . and have a hand in everything . . . that concerns them as citizens.” A leader of the Florida Colored Alliance said, “We are aware of the fact that the laboring colored man’s interests and the laboring white man’s interests are one and the same.”

The movement spread rapidly across the South and Midwest. By 1889, there was a National Farmers Alliance with at least 400,000 active members. They began to see the need for governmental changes—regulation of railroad rates, loosening of fiscal policy—if their program was to succeed, but neither of the major political parties was interested in reform, so in 1890 the Alliance spawned the People’s Party (or Populist Party).

The move into electoral politics brought the issue of Southern interracial cooperation to the forefront. Black people were still voting in much of the South, so to succeed, the People’s Party had to draw some Black Southern voters away from the Republicans—the party of Emancipation. This necessity pushed Southern populists ever closer to a true alliance of equals. In Texas, two Blacks were elected to the new party’s executive committee. “They are in the ditch just like we are,” said a white populist leader. In North Carolina, Blacks were elected to local offices on the Peoples’ Party ticket, with white support.

In Georgia, where twenty-four Black delegates attended the Peoples’ Party convention, party leader, Tom Watson, urged interracial unity. “You are kept apart,” he said, “so that you may be
separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both.”

The ghosts of Bacon’s army were stirring again. As Southern historian C. Vann Woodward put it in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, “Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the Populist struggle.”

Then it all ended. “Power concedes nothing without a struggle,” the abolitionist ex-slave Frederick Douglass wrote. And the power of the Southern white ruling class was now aroused as it had not been since the Civil War. In a few places, Klan or Klan-like groups attacked interracial populist gatherings. “Bourbon Democrats,” representing the planter class and Democratic courthouse machines, still controlled most of the state legislatures in the South. They adopted new state constitutions and passed laws designed to disenfranchise Black and poor white voters, make interracial organizing difficult, and erect a wall of separation between the two races that had been moving closer together. The 1890s was the time when the poll tax and literacy test became requirements for voting in the South. It was also the time when “Jim Crow” laws were passed that required segregation of the races in almost every imaginable public context. “White” and “Colored” signs went up all over the South, and the possibility of a class-based alliance between Black and white was lost for decades to come.

**Race and Class Today**

Of course, the spirit of 1676 never completely died out in the U.S. it lived on in some sectors of the labor union movement. In the 1930s, Black and white tenant farmers formed the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) that, at its peak, represented about 40,000 tenants and sharecroppers in five states. (Simmons, 2019, p. 142). With support from people in, or close to, the New Deal Roosevelt administration, the STFU actually survived an onslaught of planter-sponsored violence against it, but it eventually died out as mechanization eliminated the need for plantation tenants. Meanwhile, in East Tennessee, the Highlander Folk School provided a biracial Southern labor movement with organizer training and a safe space for integrated meetings and fellowship (Highlander Research and Education Center, 2021).

When the U.S. Black freedom movement took off in the 1950s and 1960s, organized labor provided one of its most important pillars of economic and political support. The whole world knows that the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott began in 1955 when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to yield her seat on a public bus to a white man. Less known is the fact that Parks worked for E.D. Nixon, an officer of the Brother of Sleeping Car Porters, an all-Black union led by A. Phillip Randolph (Stanford University, 2018). Even less known is the fact that Randolph sent his most skilled and trusted aide, Bayard Rustin, to Montgomery to help guide the boycott’s strategy and organization (Stanford University, 2018). All through the 1960s, union money, especially that of the United Auto Workers, was crucial to the functioning of the Black freedom movement, and black and white union members swelled the numbers of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Henderson, 2019).

The dramatic climax of the freedom movement should have been the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. Martin Luther King, Jr., the main organizer of the Campaign, had long talked about the interconnected “triple evils” in America: racism, poverty and economic exploitation, and
militarism. After getting the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act passed, in 1965 he began to focus more attention on classism and militarism. King had seen the connection between racism and classism early on. As King said in his “Our God is Marching On” speech at the end of the Selma to Montgomery March (King, 1965):

“Racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races immediately after the Civil War. There were no laws segregating the races then. And as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his book The Strange Case of Jum Crow, clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses and southern labor the cheapest in the land....[I]t was a simple thing to keep the poor white masses working for near-starvation wages in the years that followed the Civil War. Why, if he poor white plantation or mill worker became dissatisfied with his low wages, the plantation or mill owner would merely threaten to fire him and hire former Negro slaves and pay him even less.”

As Jelani Cobb (2022) noted, this “so called split-labor market theory” to which King subscribed contended that racism against blacks hurt both black and white workers. King (1965) went on to note that the Populist movement that developed near the end of Reconstruction, discussed earlier in this essay, united poor whites and blacks into a movement and voting block that threatened the power of the white political and economic elite. As King (1965) said, “To meet this threat, the [white elite] began immediately to engineer this development of a segregated society” that included laws making it illegal for blacks and whites “to come together as equals at any level..... That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century.” These comments by King in a speech at the end of the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights in 1965 make it easy to understand why he went on to organize the Poor People’s Campaign a couple of years later.

In 1967, King turned his energies to organizing a nonviolent, interracial army of the poor to descend upon Washington, DC ready to stop the functioning of government until Congress enacted a social and economic bill of rights including such economic reforms as a guaranteed annual income. Vincent Harding, a close associate of King, wrote: “For the first time, Native Americans, blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites were all beginning to talk about the ways in which we might, together, find a way to speak to the poverty that cuts across all racial lines...” (quoted in Collum, 1996, 72-73). Harding continued: “[King] was trying to find a way of organizing folks to deal with poverty through some form of revolutionary nonviolence.... King said that the way you deal with racism is to find a common vision that will join you together. Find a common task on which those of all races can work together. That is the best way o deal with racism in American society” (quoted in Collum, 1996, 73). By the time of King’s assassination April 4, 1968, organizing was well underway among Hispanics, indigenous people, and the poor whites of Appalachia, as well as Black people in King’s Deep South base. After King’s death, the Poor People’s Campaign never regained its momentum and failed to achieve any significant reforms (Stanford University, 2018).

Today, another African American pastor, Reverend William Barber, is out to revive King’s vision with a new Poor People’s Campaign. The movement launched in 2018, on the 50th anniversary of the first Poor People’s Campaign, continues King’s assault on the interlocking evils of poverty,
racism, and militarism, with an emphasis on uniting poor whites and Blacks around their common economic interest. Barber sees himself building on King’s insight that

every time in this country there is an opportunity for Black and white poor people to come together and build political power to change this nation… the aristocracy sows division… And his point is that poor Black and white people would hold the power in the South and elsewhere if they ever woke up to this fact. This is as true today as it was then… The politicians aren’t going to do this for us. Republicans want to keep the divisions, and often Democrats don’t seriously try to overcome them. So we’ve decided we can’t wait on the politicians. We need a movement. (Illing, 2020).

In the wake of the George Floyd murder and subsequent protests, much public attention has focused on books, school curricula and workshops designed to lead white Americans into acknowledging their privilege and becoming anti-racists. Books such as White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo and How to Be an Anti-Racist by Ibram X. Kendi became runaway best-sellers (Harris, 2020). However, a study published in the January 2021 issue of The American Journal of Political Science found that the most effective strategy for reducing anti-Black attitudes, especially among non-college-educated whites, may not be books or conferences or role-playing exercises, but by working together on a common interest, such as by organizing whites into labor unions where they will join Black and brown co-workers in a common cause. Authors Paul Frymer and Jacob Grumbach crunched the numbers and found that, using standard social science measurements of racial attitudes and controlling for other factors, white union members had lower “racial resentment” scores than their non-union peers. In fact, even past membership in a union left white workers with significantly less racial resentment than their counterparts with no union experience.

Today in the U.S. union membership is at an all-time low. Only 13 percent of American workers belong to unions, and in the private sector only six percent of workers are organized. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) However, 65 percent of Americans tell pollsters that they approve of unions (including even 45 percent of self-identified Republicans), and 48 percent of non-union workers polled said they would join a union at their workplace tomorrow if they had the chance. These are the highest numbers seen in decades (Economic Policy Institute, 2021).

2021 saw a surprising wave of worker strikes in the U.S. As of October that year, according to one count, there were 178 strikes going on involving tens of thousands of American workers (Bliss, 2021). That means white, Black and brown workers standing together, taking risks for each other and for their common good.

That’s the spirit of 1676, and that’s the key to real long-term racial reconciliation in the U.S.A. The interracial struggle for the full realization of justice and democracy in America continues.
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Bibliography


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ii This section of this article is mostly drawn from my book Rising to Common Ground: Overcoming America’s Color Lines (2006). Sowers Books, a division of JustFaith. Pp. 32-34.