

The New York Times and Nicole Hannah-Jones abandon key claims of the 1619 Project

By Tom Mackaman and David North
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The *New York Times*, without announcement or explanation, has altered the central claim of the 1619 Project: that 1619, the year the first slaves were brought to Colonial Virginia—and not 1776—was the “true founding” of the United States.

The initial introduction to the Project, when it was rolled out in August 2019, stated that

The 1619 Project is a major initiative from the New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, *understanding 1619 as our true founding*, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.

The revised text now reads:

The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from The New York Times Magazine that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.

A similar change was made from the print version of the 1619 Project, which has been sent out to millions of school children in all 50 states. The original version read:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. *America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began.* No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed.

The website version has deleted the key claim. It now reads:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. No

aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed.

It is not entirely clear when the *Times* deleted its “true founding” claim, but an examination of old cached versions of the 1619 Project text indicates that it probably took place on December 18, 2019.

These deletions are not mere wording changes. The “true founding” claim was the core element of the Project’s assertion that all of American history is rooted in and defined by white racial hatred of blacks. According to this narrative, trumpeted by Project creator Nicole Hannah-Jones, the American Revolution was a preemptive racial counterrevolution waged by white people in North America to defend slavery against British plans to abolish it. The fact that there is no historical evidence to support this claim did not deter the *Times* and Hannah-Jones from declaring that the historical identification of 1776 with the creation of a new nation is a myth, as is the claim that the Civil War was a progressive struggle aimed at the destruction of slavery. According to the *New York Times* and Hannah-Jones, the fight against slavery and all forms of oppression were struggles that black Americans always waged alone.

The *Times*’ “disappearing,” with a few secret keystrokes, of its central argument, without any explanation or announcement, is a stunning act of intellectual dishonesty and outright fraud. When it launched the 1619 Project in August 2019, the *Times* proclaimed that its aim was to radically change what and how students were taught about American history. With the aim of creating a new syllabus based on the 1619 Project, hundreds of thousands of copies of the original version of the narrative, as published in the *New York Times Magazine*, were printed and distributed to schools, museums and libraries all across the United States. A very large number of schools declared that they would align their curricula in accordance with the narrative supplied by the *Times*.

The deletion of the claim that 1619 was the “true founding” came to light this past Friday, September 18. Ms. Hannah-Jones was interviewed on CNN and asked to respond to Donald Trump’s denunciation, from the standpoint of a fascist, of the 1619 Project. Hannah-Jones declared that the “true founding” contention was “of course” not true. She went further, making the astonishing, and demonstrably false, claim that the *Times* had never made such an argument.

The exchange went as follows:

CNN: *Trump’s Executive order speaks to a misconception that I know that you have tried to address about what the 1619 Project is, that it is not an effort to rewrite history about when this nation was*

founded.

Hannah-Jones: *Of course, we know that 1776 was the founding of this country. The Project does not argue that 1776 was not the founding of the country.*

This is, of course, an outright lie. Hannah-Jones has repeatedly made the “true founding” claim in innumerable Tweets, interviews and lectures. These are attested to in news articles and video clips readily available on the Internet. Her own Twitter account included her image against a backdrop consisting of the year 1619, with the year 1776 crossed out next to it.

Ms. Hannah-Jones, caught in one lie, doubles down with new and even bigger lies. The *Times* journalist-celebrity not only denies her project’s central argument. In self-contradictory fashion, she also says that the “true founding” claim was just a bit of a rhetorical flourish. She told CNN that the 1619 Project was merely an effort to move the study of slavery to the forefront of American history.

If, as Hannah-Jones now claims, all the *Times* had sought to do was draw more attention to the history of chattel slavery in the years it existed in British North America (1619-1776) and the United States (1776-1865), there would never have been a controversy. Neither the *World Socialist Web Site*, nor the scholars it interviewed—James McPherson, Gordon Wood, Victoria Bynum, James Oakes, Clayborne Carson, Richard Carwardine, Delores Janiewski, and Adolph Reed Jr.—ever disputed the importance of slavery in the historical development of the United States. Tens of thousands of books and scholarly articles that have been devoted to the study of slavery and its impact on the historical development of the United States.

In its initial reply to the 1619 Project, published in early September 2019, the WSWS explained:

American slavery is a monumental subject with vast and enduring historical and political significance. The events of 1619 are part of that history. But what occurred at Port Comfort is one episode in the global history of slavery, which extends back into the ancient world, and of the origins and development of the world capitalist system.

The WSWS’ rebuttal of the *Times* provided an account of the emergence of chattel slavery in the Western Hemisphere, its central role in the formation of capitalism, and its revolutionary destruction in the Civil War. Hannah-Jones responded to the WSWS intervention by denouncing its writers as “anti-black racists” on Twitter.

When Wood, McPherson, Bynum, and Oakes, joined by Sean Wilentz of Princeton, wrote an open letter to the *Times* last December requesting specific corrections to clear errors of fact, they stressed that their objection was not over whether or not slavery was important. The five historians expressed their dismay “at some of the factual errors in the project and the closed process behind it.”

New York Times Magazine Editor Jake Silverstein published a haughty and dismissive reply, in which he flatly rejected their criticisms:

Though we respect the work of the signatories, appreciate that they are motivated by scholarly concern and applaud the efforts they have made in their own writings to illuminate the nation’s past, we disagree with their claim that our project contains significant factual errors and is driven by ideology rather than historical understanding. While we welcome criticism, we don’t believe that the request for corrections to The 1619 Project is warranted.

Silverstein’s disgraceful letter appeared on December 20. At that point, he knew that the *Times*’ 1619 Project was fatally flawed and that the newspaper had surreptitiously made a fundamental change in the online text of the articles to which the distinguished historians had objected. Silverstein’s behavior demonstrated a complete lack of professional ethics and intellectual integrity.

The *Times* is now obligated to issue a public statement acknowledging its distortion of history and the dishonest attempt to cover up its error. It should issue a public apology to Professors Gordon Woods, James McPherson, Sean Wilentz, Victoria Bynum, James Oakes and all other scholars it sought to discredit for having criticized the 1619 Project. To be perfectly blunt, Mr. Silverstein and his confederates in the editorial board of the *Times* should be dismissed from their posts.

Furthermore, the Pulitzer Prize given to Hannah-Jones this spring in the field commentary for her lead essay, in which the false claims about the “true founding” and the American Revolution were made, should be rescinded.

The 1619 Project was never about historical clarification. As the WSWS warned in September 2019, the “1619 Project is one component of a deliberate effort to inject racial politics into the heart of the 2020 elections and foment divisions among the working class.” As revealed in a leaked meeting with *Times* staff, Executive Editor Dean Baquet believed that it would be helpful to the Democratic Party to shift focus after the failed anti-Russia campaign. Baquet said:

[R]ace and understanding of race should be a part of how we cover the American story ... one reason we all signed off on the 1619 Project and made it so ambitious and expansive was to teach our readers to think a little bit more like that. Race in the next year—and I think this is, to be frank, what I would hope you come away from this discussion with—race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story.

The fraud perpetrated by the *Times* has already had serious political consequences. As the WSWS warned, the 1619 Project has been enormous gift to Donald Trump. On September 17, Constitution Day, Trump delivered a speech at the National Archives Museum in which he obscenely postured as a defender of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution against the “radical left,” specifically naming the 1619 Project. In his typically menacing fashion, Trump warned that he would “restore patriotic education” and that “our youth will be taught to love America.”

It was in response to Trump’s attacks that Hannah-Jones appeared on CNN. She noted that Trump is trying “to bring the 1619 Project into the culture wars.” She went on, “He clearly is running on a nationalistic campaign that’s trying to stoke racial divisions, and he sees it as a tool in that arsenal.”

True enough. But Hannah-Jones is one of the key “stokers” of racial divisions; and it was the *New York Times* that brought “the 1619 Project into the culture wars,” viciously attacking all critics of a historical narrative that makes racial hatred the driving force of American history.

The falsification of history always serves the interests of reactionary political forces. By repudiating and denigrating the American Revolution and Civil War, the *New York Times* has provided an opportunity for Trump to fraudulently posture as a defender of the great democratic legacy of America’s revolutions in the interests of his neo-fascist politics.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>

