

TIMES INSIDER

How the 1619 Project Came Together

Since January, The Times Magazine has been working on an issue to mark the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved people arriving in America. Now, it includes a special section, a multipart audio series and more.

By Lovia Gyarkye

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Times Insider explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

In August 1619, a ship carrying more than 20 enslaved Africans arrived at a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. The people on board were sold to colonists, marking the beginning of a more than two-century-long institution that would radically alter and continue to inform the identity of a young nation.

This month is the 400th anniversary of that ship's arrival. To commemorate this historic moment and its legacy, The New York Times Magazine has dedicated an entire issue and special broadsheet section, out this Sunday, to exploring the history of slavery and mapping the ways in which it has touched nearly every aspect of contemporary life in the United States.

The 1619 Project began as an idea pitched by Nikole Hannah-Jones, one of the magazine's staff writers, during a meeting in January. Her proposal was clear and ambitious: to dedicate an issue of the Sunday magazine to examining the ways the legacy of slavery continues to shape our country. Its implications,

particularly for a newspaper that continues to face criticism for its past and present coverage of black Americans, were huge.

“I have spent every moment of this project keenly aware of what it means to be doing this in The New York Times,” Ms. Hannah-Jones, who won a MacArthur Grant in 2017 for her work on American segregation, said in an interview. “It’s very powerful, and it’s very fraught at the same time.”

The 1619 Project Aug. 14, 2019



1619

The magazine staff was immediately on board. “It was an opportunity for us to do something that was necessary,” said Jake Silverstein, the editor of the magazine.

Those involved knew it was a big task, one that would require the expertise of those who have dedicated their entire lives and careers to studying the nuances of what it means to be a black person in America. Ms. Hannah-Jones invited 18 scholars and historians — including Kellie Jones, a Columbia University art historian and 2016 MacArthur Fellow; Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor of law and history at Harvard; and William Darity, a professor of public policy at the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University — to meet with editors and journalists at The Times early this year. The brainstorming session cemented key components of the issue, including what broad topics would be covered (for example, sugar, capitalism and cotton) and who would contribute (including Linda Villarosa, Bryan Stevenson and Khalil Gibran Muhammad). The feature stories were then chiseled by Ms. Hannah-Jones with the help of Ilena Silverman, the magazine’s features editor.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Almost every contributor in the magazine and special section — writers, photographers and artists — is black, a nonnegotiable aspect of the project that helps underscore its thesis, Ms. Hannah-Jones said. The magazine recruited talents like the artist Adam Pendelton, whose piece opens Ms. Hannah-Jones’s lead essay, and the photographer Djenéba Aduayom, whose photo essay about the ancestry of a group of Howard University Law School graduates closes the issue. Dannielle Bowman shot the cover photograph, which is a view of the water just off the coast of Hampton, Va.

“A lot of ideas were considered, but ultimately we decided that there was an undeniable power in narrowing our focus to the very place that this issue kicks off,” said Jessica Dimson, the deputy director of photography of the magazine. “Dannielle Bowman’s solemn photograph of the water is not just symbolic, but it is also a document of living history.”

Nearly every piece in the issue is anchored by a contemporary image — a constant reminder that even though slavery was formally abolished more than

150 years ago, its legacy has remained insidious. Each decision, from which kind of fonts to use to the illustrations, was an attempt to balance the events of the past with their present-day implications. Poems and short stories, specifically created for this project by some of the most influential black artists working today, such as Jesmyn Ward, Barry Jenkins and Lynn Nottage, populate the pages between each essay, offering a kind of literary timeline of black life in America over the last 400 year

In the time that the issue was coming together, through a series of conversations between Mr. Silverstein; Ms. Hannah-Jones; Ms. Silverman; Ms. Dimson; Gail Bichler; Kathy Ryan, director of photography; and Caitlin Roper, the editorial director of The New York Times Magazine Labs, Ms. Hannah-Jones's initial pitch morphed, and expanded, into a special project, something that would go far beyond just one issue of the magazine and involve other departments at The Times.

“I like the notion that a project is a kind of activity that you engage in toward a goal, and that's the best way I can think of to describe what this is,” said Mr. Silverstein.¶¶

The special section, which was spearheaded by Ms. Roper and Deb Bishop, the team's art director, went through several iterations before it was decided that it would focus on painting a more full, but by no means comprehensive, picture of the institution of slavery itself.

“The idea was to use historical objects and visuals from the National Museum of African American History and Culture as a jumping-off point to pull readers in and begin to tell them this history,” said Ms. Roper.

The broadsheet special section has two components: A reported essay by Nikita Stewart, a reporter on The Times's Metro desk, examining why Americans are so poorly educated on slavery, followed by a history of slavery written by Mary Elliott, curator of American slavery at the Smithsonian's National Museum of

African American History and Culture, and Jazmine Hughes, a writer and editor at The Times Magazine.

The project also includes a multipart audio series with The Daily featuring Ms. Hannah-Jones, a page dedicated to understanding the significance of 1619 in the upcoming issue of The New York Times for Kids, and a partnership with the Pulitzer Center to create a curriculum that will be distributed in schools across the country. The Times has also printed hundreds of thousands of extra copies of the magazine and special section to be distributed for free at libraries, museums and schools.

Of course, this is only the beginning. The 1619 Project is first and foremost an invitation to reframe how the country discusses the role and history of its black citizens. “As much as I hope white readers will read it and have their minds blown, I hope that black people will read it, and feel a sense of ownership over this country and a sense of pride in our resilience,” Ms. Hannah-Jones said. “I hope to reframe the way we see ourselves in America.”

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