

An Update to The 1619 Project

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By Jake Silverstein

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Today we are making a clarification to a passage in [an essay from The 1619 Project](#) that has sparked a great deal of online debate. The passage in question states that one primary reason the colonists fought the American Revolution was to protect the institution of slavery. This assertion has elicited criticism from some historians and support from others.

We stand behind the basic point, which is that among the various motivations that drove the patriots toward independence was a concern that the British would seek or were already seeking to disrupt in various ways the entrenched system of American slavery. Versions of this interpretation can be found in much of the scholarship into the origins and character of the Revolution that has marked the past 40 years or so of early American historiography — in part because historians of the past few decades have increasingly scrutinized the role of slavery and the agency of enslaved people in driving events of the Revolutionary period.

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. [Read all the stories.](#)

That accounting is itself part of a growing acceptance that the patriots represented a truly diverse coalition animated by a variety of interests, which varied by region, class, age, religion and a host of other factors, a point succinctly demonstrated in the title that the historian Alan Taylor chose for his 2016 account of the period:

“American Revolutions.” (For some key selections from the recent scholarly work on the Revolution, see this [list of suggested reading](#) from the Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture.)

If the scholarship of the past several decades has taught us anything, it is that we should be careful not to assume unanimity on the part of the colonists, as many previous interpretive histories of the patriot cause did. We recognize that our original language could be read to suggest that protecting slavery was a primary motivation for *all of* the colonists. The passage has been changed to make clear that this was a primary motivation for *some of* the colonists. A note has been appended to the story as well.

Revision and clarification are important parts of historical inquiry, and we are grateful to the many scholars whose insightful advice has helped us decide to make this change, among them Danielle Allen, Carol Anderson, Christopher L. Brown, Eric Foner, Nicholas Guyatt, Leslie Harris, Woody Holton, Martha S. Jones, Jack N. Rakove, James Brewer Stewart and David Waldstreicher. Recently, The New York Times Magazine also hosted a public conversation about this very subject with the historians Annette Gordon-Reed, Eliga H. Gould, Gerald Horne, Alan Taylor and Karin Wulf. These five scholars also helped deepen our sense of the period’s complexity. (A video of the conversation can be found [here](#).)

One outcome of The 1619 Project that we are grateful for is how it has shown all of us, historians and journalists alike, how important it is to continue to work together to illuminate the past.