

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

Some people come from the “the land down under”. I come from the land “where old times are not forgotten”. As historians we must recommit to helping our youth understand our history and realize that without a commanding knowledge of our history, there is no future for a free United States of America.

It is natural to fight for your place in the sun. God has even been known to assist people in that struggle; but it is diabolical to lie about your opponent. That is unforgivable.

For this reason we must remove the perceived obligation to assign guilt, shame and victimhood upon historical individuals as we study the history of slavery in the United States of America. The historical study of a topic should be guided by the search for the facts of the matter and not by the hunger of delivering an argument of guilt and the need to see that someone is shamed, or as expressed in Japanese society, that someone “lose face”.

A court of law often instructs a witness to answer a question with simply yes or no. The witness is cautioned not to share or draw any conclusions but to simply state facts. The witness is also instructed to refrain from giving “hearsay” testimony (that is, he said/she said testimony). We want the witness to testify only to what he or she saw take place without an opinion on the incident. When it comes to historiography, those are the goals of the historian. They are extremely difficult goals because in most cases, we are left to trying to discover facts that are long past and there are no eye witnesses left to examine for facts. Our task becomes one of searching for documents that record firsthand accounts and descriptions of events of the time. We scrutinize those documents to discern the events and suppositions

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

as they were understood within the context of the existing times, taking care not to make judgements about the facts or view them through the lenses of our present day sentiments.

This is extremely troublesome when it comes to studying slavery. For the 21st century mind, it is almost impossible to consider or to talk about slavery without cringing in disgust. It is hard to think of a slave without picturing a person who has been completely dehumanized. However since slavery was so widespread in the world and has such a long history in all human societies, it should be obvious that in the past, not all people have thought as we currently think about slavery or slaves. It is noteworthy to remember that the earliest laws regulating the treatment and the rights of slaves and masters are found in ancient African texts of ancient Egypt, in the old testament of the Holy Bible and in the Holy Quran. If we are to understand the phenomenon of slavery and the role of slaves, we must overcome our fixation for assigning guilt and the compulsion to see the slave only from the point of victimization.

What if 200 years into the future, people judged our society only by the political headlines being printed in the United States today? They could conclude that most black people were gangsters and jailed, had no professions or skills and were poor and/or on welfare. They could conclude that just about every white person was successful, lived in above average homes, and any who did not were simply lazy and dumb. As ludicrous as this sounds, that is the kind of judgement that we are making about our ancestors during early/colonial American and antebellum American history in the United States of America. Our interpretation of United States history is based upon current attitudes and upon how we are teaching that history. We are more concerned with placing guilt and victimhood than we are in knowing

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

and understanding events in context. It is more important to examine how slavery and the presence of slaves impacted the processes of creating a society that placed such high values upon individual freedoms and self-determination.

Did you know that indigenous Americans (Indians) often practiced slavery long before the arrival of Europeans or Africans?

Not all “black people” arrived in America as slaves

“The biggest surprise to me, without a doubt, was that the first “black people” that came to the United States weren’t the 20 who arrived in Jamestown in 1619. All of us had been taught that. Well guess what? The first African came to Florida in 1513. And the huge shock is, we know his name, Juan Garrido, and that he wasn’t a slave. He was free! This brother was a conquistador who came with Ponce de Leon. He was looking for the Fountain of Youth just like the white people were.” -Henry Louis Gates

“Born in West Africa, Juan Garrido (C. 1480-C.1550) is the most prominent among the small group of African freeman who traveled to the Americas to take part in the Spanish conquest of the West Indies and Mexico in the late 15th and early 16th Centuries. He later became an agricultural innovator and is credited with introducing wheat harvesting to the Americas.” <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/garrido-juan-c-1480-c-1550/>

THE BLACK CONQUISTODORS (1520 through 1600)

Although most Africans came to America, in the early days, as slaves, records show that many black freedmen from Seville and other Spanish cities found passage to the New World either to settle in the Caribbean region or to follow the conquests of Mexico and Peru. They

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

identified themselves as Catholic subjects to the King with the same privileges and opportunities as white Spaniards.

Many people of African descent used military service as a means to emancipation and inclusion in Spanish society. As the numbers of settlers in Spanish territory increased, the Black Conquistadors acted as pacifiers and security forces. Some of them were awarded land grants and special recognition. Another well-known black conquistador was Estavanico.

Conquistadors of African ancestry accompanied the expedition of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado from Mexico City to what is now central Kansas. Some Africans remained behind in Kansas and New Mexico after Coronado departed, and are believed to have been absorbed into the native tribes.

“In June 1526, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, a wealthy Spanish official in the city of Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, founded a colony at or near the mouth of the Pee Dee River in eastern South Carolina. Six decades before Roanoke Island (1587), eight decades before Jamestown (1607), and almost a century before the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock (1620), Ayllon began his North American dream.” –

<https://www.sciway.net/afam/slavery/indexs.html>

“Those Africans launched a rebellion in November of that year and effectively destroyed the Spanish settlers’ ability to sustain the settlement, which they abandoned a year later. Nearly 100 years before Jamestown, African actors enabled American colonies to survive, and they were equally able to destroy European colonial ventures.” ([Smithsonian Magazine](#))

THE STORY OF ISABEL DE OLVERA (1598)

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

Isabel de Olvera, a free woman living in Mexico, accompanied the Juan Guerra de Resa Expedition which colonized what is now New Mexico. She is best known for a deposition given before a Spanish court avowing her rights before her journey.

“I am going on the expedition to New Mexico and have some reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individuals since I am a mulatta, and it is proper to protect my rights in such an eventuality by an affidavit showing that I am a free woman and the legitimate daughter of Hernando, a Negro, and an Indian woman. I therefore request your grace to accept this affidavit which shows that I am free and not bound by marriage or slavery. I request that a properly certified and signed copy be given to me in order to protect my rights, and that carry full legal authority. I demand justice.” Despite her fear, Isabel made the journey.

Did you know that the majority of early immigrants to what would become the United States arrived in some degree of bonded labor (indentured or sold as slaves) and were mostly from northern Europe (white people)? The grandmother of Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), was Molly Walsh a young white girl from England, sold into service as punishment for theft. After working off her indenture, Molly was able to start a small tobacco farm. In order to increase the yield of her farm, Molly went aboard a slave ship and purchased an African named Bannaky. Molly Walsh and Bannaky married and took Bannaky as the family name. Their oldest daughter, Mary also married a slave and they took the family name of Banneker as written by Molly at the time. Molly and Bannaky were Benjamin’s grandparents. Benjamin taught himself astronomy and surveying and was appointed to the federal survey commission that planed Washington, D.C. He is best known for calculating “ephemerides,” tables that use the locations of the sun, moon, and stars to measure

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

time. From 1792 to 1802, he published an almanac.—Molly Bannaky, Alice McGill, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1999.

The great grandmother and great grandfather of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson arrived in America as condemned convicts on a convict ship. They landed in Annapolis in 1749. They were purchased by different owners but stayed in touch and eventually married. — From *Slave Ship to Harvard*, James H. Johnston, Fordham University Press, New York 2012.

My earliest known African ancestor thus far identified through DNA analysis was my 8th great-grandfather, Edward Mazingo (1644-1712), born in Virginia. It is highly probable that he was a descendant of an African who arrived in 1619 and not improbable that he was a descendant of a conquistador because some of his descendants have Indigenous American DNA, as do I. After working off his indenture and upon obtaining his free papers, he married Margaret Pierce Bayley (1646-1711) my 8th great-grandmother, a “white woman.” They are the progenitors of one of the oldest and successful multiracial families in the south. By the mid-17th century, about 20% of the free black men in Virginia owned homes and property with a substantial number of them married to white women. At the time there was a shortage of marriageable free black women and children took the legal status of their mother (slave or free). Free and/or enslaved black men preferred their children’s mother to be a free woman, disregarding race. I am (like many black Americans) a descendant of indentured servants and slaves (some of whom were Indian, European and African) and free blacks, some of whom gained their freedom long before Abraham Lincoln’s ancestors arrived in America.

Removing Guilt and Shame from the Study of Slavery

By Barbara Marthal on Oct 15, 2020

Did you know that African slaves created the first cash crops that made colonial America rich? Those crops were rice and indigo. Black West Africans knew best how to grow and process those crops, thus the demand for slaves from the west coast of Africa in South Carolina, Georgia and the Georgia Sea Islands. In addition to being horticulturalists, slaves from Africa arrived with the skills of animal husbandry, metal workers, sailors, fishermen, musicians, tradesmen and merchants, barbers, leather workers, weavers, blacksmiths, herbalists, healers, midwives, etc., etc., etc. They passed that knowledge and expertise down through their children.

Have I made my point? We must make an effort to understand the institution of slavery. We know that it could be a brutal and barbaric institution that was easily worsened by greed and led to the mistreatment of our fellow human beings. That should never be forgotten. However in teaching the history of the institution we cannot allow that history to overshadow or obliterate the achievements and contributions of the individual men and women who were the slaves, indentured servants, free people and sometimes masters of the institution. There is much more to be learned about the institution of slavery and the contributions of people within that institution in the United States of America. The story should be far more compelling than just assigning guilt and victimhood. **SPEND MORE TIME COMBING THROUGH THE DOCUMENTS OF YOUR LOCAL AND STATE ARCHIVES!**

About Barbara Marthal

Barbara Marthal is an author and storyteller who focuses on the relationship between white and black Southerners and her own Southern heritage.