

A Call to Remember Jamestown

We call on everyone to prepare observances for the 400th Anniversary of the arrival in 1619 at Jamestown of the first Africans to be sold into bondage. These Africans were the first of millions that followed as slaves to work on plantations established on land stolen from the indigenous peoples of the continent.

Colonialism and slavery were soon codified into laws promoting inequality and legitimating oppression and terror. These laws and the practices they encouraged were and remain formidable barriers against efforts by Native Americans, African Americans, poor whites, and numerous other groups, to unite against the dispossession and occupation of lands, and exploitative and oppressive life and work conditions.

Some hundred years after the beginning of the trade in humans, principles that explicitly and emphatically contradicted structures of inequality and dehumanization were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. A years later, however, the Constitution would advance one of the most pernicious accountings of human worth by asserting that slaves counted as only 3/5's of a person. The contradictions and hypocrisy evident in the founding documents is manifest today as an elaborate network of social, economic, political and spiritual divisions that reproduce ever more elaborate forms of inequality.

This accounting of personhood established in the Constitution diminishes the humanity of vast groups of people while elevating others to the status of "natural" supremacy. This leger of worth and legitimacy constrains all our lives, including the lives of oppressors, for it is spiritually impoverished and forecloses the building of diverse, caring, joyful, and free communities.

We need desperately to link arms in radical equality.

Starting now, we can renew and strengthen the long struggle for full emancipation, equity, and justice by coming together to remember the events at Jamestown and the pernicious and persistent devaluing of persons that has been a central structure of U.S. history. We need to unify, account for the past, and assume the rights and responsibility of the future for all if we are to meet the challenges ahead. These challenges include climate change, decaying physical infrastructure, rapidly evolving jobs, underperforming schools, uneven access to health care, and a lack of affordable housing.

