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### Learning from the Past: A brief historical background

Steve Carr

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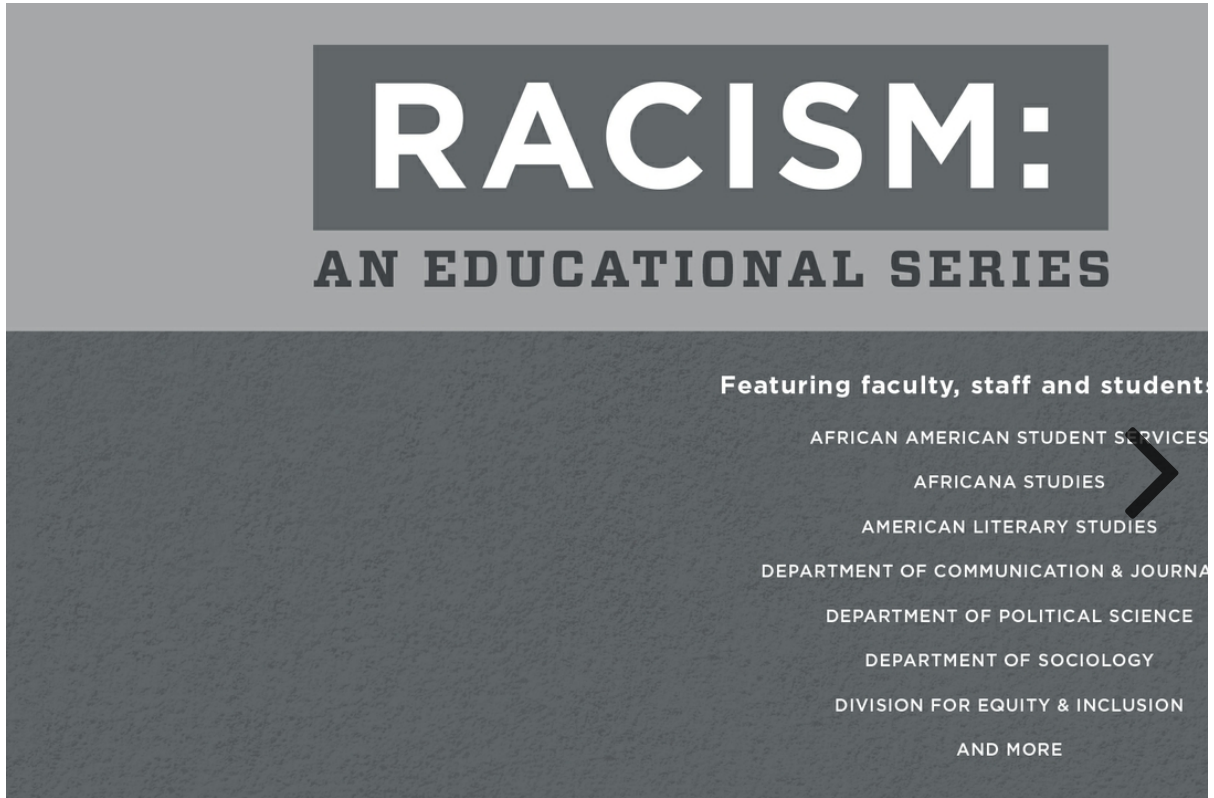
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# Learning from the Past: A brief historical background

The beginning and end of the U.S. slave trade

By Steve Carr © June 19, 2020

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A wise man once said “if you don’t learn from the past (history) you are condemned to repeat it” to paraphrase the quote slightly. As UNM’s Communications and Marketing Department (UCAM) undertakes an effort to help educate the campus community involving the current Black Lives Matter movement through an extensive series covering an array of related subjects and areas that need work, it is important to note several historical moments in our nation’s history that have led us to this precipice we currently face as a nation. The first story in the series provides a brief historical background that takes us back to the 15th Century up to the Reconstruction Amendments (1865-70) that will help set the framework for the remaining stories in the series. It is by no means a comprehensive account of all the history that unfolded during that timeframe.

### **In the 15th Century**

It was back in the 15th century when the Roman Catholic Church divided the world in half. It granted Portugal a monopoly on West African trade and gave Spain the right to colonize the New World as part of its quest for land and gold. The move affirmed Portugal’s exclusive trade rights to territories along the West African coast and also granted the Portuguese country the right to invade, plunder and reduce the people in West Africa as a people of perpetual slavery. The move also led to the rejection of enslaved Native American with the thinking that they were Spanish subjects. Later, Spain established what was called an “*asiento*,” or contract authorizing direct shipment of captive Africans for trade as human commodities within the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Further, in an effort to increase her wealth, Spain’s Queen Isabella invested in Christopher Columbus’ exploration.

### **Story Highlights...**

- **In the 15th Century**
- **The U.S. slave trade begins (1619-1863)**
- **The Civil War (1861-1865)**
- **The Emancipation Proclamation (1863)**
- **Juneteenth (1865)**
- **The Reconstruction Amendments (1865-1870)**

Soon thereafter, other European nation-states including the Netherlands, France, Denmark and England, sought similar economic and geopolitical power and joined in on the trade that led to the exchanging of goods and people with leaders along the West African coast. Long-known for its mineral-laden land and wealth with gold and other trade goods, the West African coast ran self-sustaining societies. The European nation-states all competed to secure the *asiento* and colonization of the New World leading to the beginning of a new form of slavery.

The endorsement by the European nation-states, based on race, resulted in the largest forced migration in the world that included approximately 12.5 million men, women and children of African descent and forced them into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The sale of and subsequent product of slave labor brought the Atlantic world into being, which included colonial North America and brought much in the way of prestige and standing in terms of political power, social prominence and wealth for the church, the European nations, New World colonies as well as to individuals. It also led to the slave trade in the United States.

### **The U.S. slave trade begins (1619-1863)**

Approximately 50,000 enslaved people, including many who were prisoners of an ongoing war between Portugal and Ndongo, were exported from Angola in southwestern Africa between 1618 and 1620. It was August 1619 when slavery hit what would later become the United States (July 1776). The São João Bautista, more commonly known as the Botafogo, a Portuguese galleon, traveled across the Atlantic Ocean filled with approximately 350 captive Africans from Angola.

The ship, which originated in Luanda, now the capital of Angola, was en route to the Spanish colony of Veracruz. However, it was intercepted by the English privateer (pirate) ship, the White Lion, and took captive some of the Africans on board to enslave and sell. The ship ended up at Point Comfort, a coastal port in Virginia colonized by the

English in 1607. This however is not the first instance of enslaved Africans. In 1565, the Spanish brought enslaved Africans to what is now St. Augustine, Fla., the first European settlement in the continental U.S.

Another critically important event that occurred in 1619 was the first democratic assembly in the New World convened by the emerging British colony.

“The history of race in this country’s history is one fraught with great contradiction and paradox,” said University of New Mexico Associate Professor of History, Dr. Robert F. Jefferson, Jr. “From the beginning of the US slave trade in 1619 and what transpired over 200 years leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 is that America (later the United States) has struggled with the legacy of slavery while professing principles of Liberty.



*Slave nurse with one of the Lugenbühl boys, New Orleans*

1890. Courtesy: New Mexico Digital Collections.

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“In fact, that is the title of one of the most influential books written on the subject. In *American Slavery/American Freedom* published in 1975, Edmund Morgan argued that the ideals and principles of the American Revolution were predicated on the institution of chattel slavery and explored how the racialization of slavery in Virginia didn’t appear in full form but evolved through the passage of legal measures that codified race. What I read in this is that the paradox of slavery and republican freedom has informed the American experience in every momentous event leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation.

“For white southerners and northerners, freedom was rooted in definitions of whiteness and the power of white privilege shaped not only their station in society but how they identified themselves from the ‘other.’” For those identified as the ‘other,’ race and slavery structured their existence from the cradle to the grave and dictated their relations with white inhabitants. But all the while, from the moment they were captured and enslaved, they shaped the parameters of their existence by resisting the ways in which slavery objectified and dehumanized them.

“This is why American history is littered with slave revolts and insurrections (Stono, San Domingue, Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Amistad, Margaret Garner, etc), suicides, literary efforts (David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and the numerous slave narratives), escaping from the institution (the Underground Railroad) and the like. For people of African descent, the Emancipation Proclamation only confirmed what was already taking place on the ground.”

### **The Civil War (1861-1865)**

The Civil War, which began on April 12, 1861, was fought over the issue of the slavery between the North (Union) and the South (Confederacy). The North supported the Constitution, while the South held firm in the states’ right to slavery. Eleven southern states seceded from the Union in 1860-61. Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as the 16th president of the United States in March 1861 and war broke out in April when the South attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina.



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Before the Civil War, the U.S. was experiencing significant growth. Manufacturing and industry were the main economic drivers in the North, while agriculture, including cotton and tobacco, were the mainstays in the South driven by the labor of enslaved people. An abolitionist movement was also growing in the North with opposition to the extension of slavery in western territories. The backbone of South's economy, slave labor, became threatened leading to war.

"The Civil War was fought over the issue of slavery. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise," said Jefferson. "The Abolitionist Movement, along with the slave revolts and insurrections, and the momentous events of the 1850s ushered in the war. Some of the examples that come to mind here are Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Bloody Kansas, the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, and John Brown's Revolt at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

"Northern espousals of liberty and commitments to Free Labor and Free Soil and Southern defensiveness over the institution of slavery brought on the shooting war. But I think that it's also important not to underestimate the efforts that African Americans made to bring the issue of the war's meaning more sharply into focus for the American public. Through formal vehicles like conventions and broadsides in Northern settings to absconding themselves from plantations in the American South, blacks were registering their discontent."

### The Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. It declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." However, the Emancipation Proclamation didn't end slavery altogether. Border states between the North and the South were left unaffected by the Proclamation. There were also areas of the Confederacy already under Northern control that were exempted. However, the big key to the Emancipation Proclamation's promise of freedom was dependent on a Union triumph in the ongoing Civil War which was nearly three years long at the time the Proclamation was issued.

As it turned out, the Emancipation Proclamation can arguably be called one of the biggest turning points in the Civil War with the allowance of Black men into the Union Army and Navy allowing "the liberated to become liberators." It fortified the North's efforts with nearly 200,000 black men becoming soldiers and sailors fighting for their freedom strengthening the North's cause militarily as well as politically.

"The Emancipation Proclamation didn't free the slaves; the slaves freed themselves," said Jefferson. "The measure didn't free slaves in the rebelling Confederate states because it was beyond its jurisdiction to do so. It left slavery intact in Border states like Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Missouri. But it had a dramatic effect on African Americans who learned of the action in Northern and Southern settings.

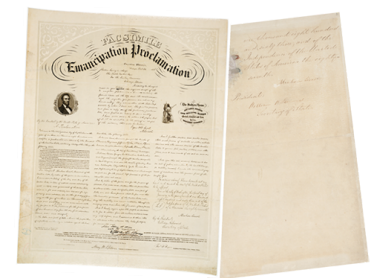
"When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, it allowed African Americans to enlist in the Union Army. With that, many African Americans flocked to the colors of the Union Army to fight for freedom. Many of the famed units that fought during the war realized that it was an all or nothing proposition. For them, freedom was real and immediate as many soldiers who stood in the ranks saw themselves as destroying slavery once and for all."

### Juneteenth (1865)

The end of slavery in the United States came on June 19, 1865 – the day in 1865 when Union soldiers landed in Texas and delivered the news that the Civil War had ended and that the Emancipation Proclamation had freed nearly four million from chattel slavery. This day,

## Alumna Spotlight: Nakia Russ

Alumna Nakia Russ is using the social ties and educational experience



(/\_gallery/get\_file/?file\_id=5ef51e682cfac23052a69db3& This facsimile of the Emancipation Proclamation is in the National Archives catalog.

June 19, 2020, marks the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth, the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration marking the end of slavery in the United States.

Union soldiers were led that day by Major General Gordon Granger landing in Galveston with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were free, nearly two-and-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The enslaved peoples' freedom finally came after the surrender of General Lee in April 1865 and the subsequent arrival of Gen. Granger's regiment further strengthening his ability to overcome what was left of the resistance.

There are various accounts as to why the news of the Emancipation Proclamation was delayed in Texas. One account involves a messenger who was killed along the way to Texas with the news of freedom. A second involves the news being withheld deliberately by slaveholders to maintain the labor force on the plantations, while a third involves federal troops waiting until the benefits of one more cotton harvest were gained before the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation.

"June 19, 1865 is very important to African Americans," said Jefferson. "This is the date that African Americans in Texas, were made aware of the Emancipation Proclamation and they marked this day as the day that they were free. It was, as one of my mentors Robin D.G. Kelley has claimed, the Fourth of July for African Americans and, in my eyes, the Black Memorial Day. It is an event that we call for the Remembrance of Slavery and the Jubilation of Freedom.

"This Juneteenth takes on special relevance for African Americans given the 45th President's initial desire to hold a rally on that date only to realize that he couldn't command the God of History. This was an affront to all African Americans," added Jefferson.

### **The Reconstruction Amendments (1865-1870)**

The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil War Amendments (1865-1870) are among the centerpieces of Reconstruction. The Thirteenth Amendment is the measure that abolished slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment declared unabridged citizenship for African Americans, due process, and equal protection under the law; and the Fifteenth Amendment conferred the franchise for African Americans.



she gained at UNM to help lead the celebration of Juneteenth alongside the City of Albuquerque (CABQ).

The virtual celebration will include live music, spoken word and dance to celebrate the end of formal slavery in America. The New Mexico Statewide Virtual Juneteenth Celebration (<https://www.cabq.gov/office-of-equity-inclusion/events/new-mexico-statewide-virtual-juneteenth-celebration>) is happening June 20, 2020 and will draw community via-web-based streaming to hear from local talent that will inspire and empower the Black Community and the entire community.

***"If it's fighting for human rights, I'm 100 percent about it." -Nakia Russ***

Russ graduated from The University of New Mexico in 2018 with a double major in Africana Studies and Psychology and a minor in Sociology. During her time at UNM, she was a member of the Black Student Union and Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority; and contributed heavily to connecting UNM students to the local Black Lives Matter movement. She was also honored with the African American Student Services Award in 2018 by African American Student Services (<http://afro.unm.edu/>) for her contributions to the campus and Albuquerque communities.

After posting on social media recently asking what her community was doing to recognize Juneteenth 2020, she joined the CABQ effort to spearhead a virtual celebration. She says it was a natural transition from her involvement at UNM, to working with the city.

"A lot of people don't know what Juneteenth is or what it represents," she explained. "It's being able to express Black culture freely and unapologetically, while also facilitating a gathering of the community to enjoy the celebration of that culture."

“Taken as a whole, these measures codified the results of the Civil War and provided a concreteness to the hopes and aspirations for African Americans of attaining equality in this country,” said Jefferson. “During that brief period, African Americans sought the accoutrements of freedom; the ability to purchase land, to control one’s labor, to gain access to education, to congregate in institutions and groups of their choosing; but most of all **to be left alone**. However, this was not to be with the onset of Jim Crow discrimination, racial separation, disfranchisement, and state-sponsored terrorism in the years and decades that followed the demise of Reconstruction.”

**Special thank you to Dr. Robert F. Jefferson Jr.**

Russ credits her professors and mentors in the Africana Studies program (<https://africanastudies.unm.edu/>) at UNM with empowering her to speak up and combat racial injustices. Her passion, dedication and courage are inspirational, as is her advice to others looking to make an impact in their communities.

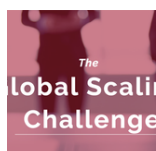
“It’s a scary thing, going up against racial injustices – especially now. But keep the goal in mind: there are problems and they need to be fixed. Be genuine, be pure, act with intention, and stay true to yourself and the movement.”

**(<https://history.unm.edu/people/faculty/profile/robert-f-jefferson-jr.html>), Associate Professor with tenure in UNM’s History Department.** Dr. Jefferson’s research interests include African American History, Twentieth Century United States History, Military History, International Relations, and Race and Disability Studies.

**Sources:** American Heritage.com (<https://www.americanheritage.com/>); Britannica.com (<https://www.britannica.com/>); National Archives.gov (<https://www.archives.gov/>); History.com (<https://www.history.com/>); Juneteenth.com (<http://juneteenth.com/>); NY Times.com (<https://www.nytimes.com/>); Time.com (<https://time.com/>); and Wikipedia.org (<https://www.wikipedia.org/>).

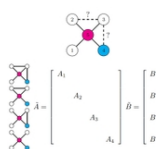
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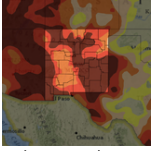
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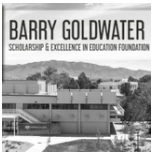
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