

“The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, the rail by the stairs, and the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. High on an aluminum pole at the edge of our lawn, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter. So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man have seen firsthand how his country abused black Americans and refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn’t understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn’t really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing Black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his

Perpetual: forever or always.

Pristine: in perfect, “mint” condition.

Redlined: a practice used by banks and lending companies that denied loans in certain neighborhoods based on race.

Growing up, why did the American flag not make sense to Hannah-Jones?

How does Nikole Jones describe her history as a Black American?

acceptance of our subordination. Like most young people, I thought I understood so much when I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the world's richest and most powerful nation were indelible and that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Virginia, one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock, and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey known as the Middle Passage. Before the international slave trade was abolished, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful

Subordination: being treated less than others

Indelible: not able to be forgotten

Take note of this claim.

Where and how does slavery in the United States begin?

Grueling: extremely

colonies in the British Empire.

Through back-breaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that, at the height of slavery, was the nation's most valuable **commodity**, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked in the Northern textile mills fueled the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island “slave trader.”

Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring, and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and

tiring and demanding

Descendants: the people that lived after them

Commodity: an economic good that can be sold for profit

(Identify) Who was **George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison?** Why do you think Hannah Jones added them to this paragraph?

How was slavery connected to the U.S. economy?

trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world. But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed.

Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights,

Bondage: The act of being enslaved

According to Nikole Jones, what does she think is "an ideal and a lie"?

Fervently: passionately

immigrant and disability rights. Without the idealistic, strenuous, and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all. My father... knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true "founding fathers." And that no people have a greater claim to that flag than us.

At the beginning of this essay, Hannah-Jones points out the embarrassment she felt at her dad's American flag. By the end of this essay, does she still feel embarrassed by that flag?