

1619 FAQs

In late August, 1619, 20-30 enslaved Africans landed at Point Comfort, today's Fort Monroe in Hampton, Va., aboard the English privateer ship *White Lion*. In Virginia, these Africans were traded in exchange for supplies. Several days later, a second ship (*Treasurer*) arrived in Virginia with additional enslaved Africans. Both groups had been captured by English privateers from the Spanish slave ship *San Juan Bautista*. They are the first recorded Africans to arrive in England's mainland American colonies.

Who were the first Africans?

The enslaved Africans aboard the *San Juan Bautista* were captured by Portuguese and Imbangala forces from the kingdom of Ndongo, in West Central Africa. The Ndongo captives were Kimbundu-speaking people from Kabasa, the capital city, and other urban areas targeted by the Portuguese invasion.

Only a few of the first Africans are named in early Virginia records. In Elizabeth City (today's Hampton), Anthony and Isabella labored on land owned by Captain William Tucker. By 1625, they had a son, also named William, who was African child named in Virginia records. Anthony and Isabella probably arrived on the *White Lion* or *Treasurer* in 1619, but records do not say for sure. At Jamestown, Angelo (or Angela) labored for William Peirce. She arrived on the *Treasurer*. Another important early African was Anthony Johnson, who arrived from England on the *James* in 1621. Johnson's experience was unusual; he was able to earn or purchase his freedom and eventually acquired land on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

Were the first Africans indentured servants or enslaved?

The historical record does not say for sure, but most historians agree the vast majority of Virginia's earliest Africans were enslaved. Certainly, they were enslaved on board the Spanish ship *San Juan Bautista*. When they arrived in Virginia, they were traded as commodities. There are no historical records to indicate they were given regular indenture contracts used by English servants. Once in Virginia, a few Africans may have been treated in a manner similar to white indentured servants or had an opportunity to earn freedom, but existing records do not indicate this was the experience for most Africans, who were enslaved from the outset.

Did the Africans arrive at Point Comfort or Jamestown?

The *White Lion*, the English ship carrying the first Africans, arrived in Virginia at Point Comfort. Original sources do not say where the Africans came ashore first, but they probably did so while at Point Comfort. The *White Lion* spent over a month in Virginia and probably also sailed to Jamestown.

Were they the first Africans in America?

Africans were present in Spanish colonies in America since 1501, and during the later 1500s were part of Spanish colonization in Florida and present-day South Carolina. Enslaved Africans were also present in the English colony of Bermuda in 1616. However, the enslaved Africans who arrived at Point Comfort in 1619 were the beginning of race-based slavery in America and are the "founders" of today's African American population.

Why does the 1619 African arrival matter now?

The first Africans' arrival in Virginia launched a system of oppression that fundamentally shaped our nation and culture and laid the foundation for generations of African Americans and their descendants. Hampton symbolizes the complexities of our history and encourages us to understand how we became who we are today. Hampton is where American slavery began. But, in a twist of fate, Hampton is also the place where slavery began to end. In the earliest days of the Civil War, three enslaved men sought freedom and escaped to Fort Monroe (at Point Comfort). Their actions spurred a massive resistance movement and sparked a shift in the United States' policy toward emancipation and ultimately abolition. The legacy of 1619 defines our nation's journey toward freedom.