



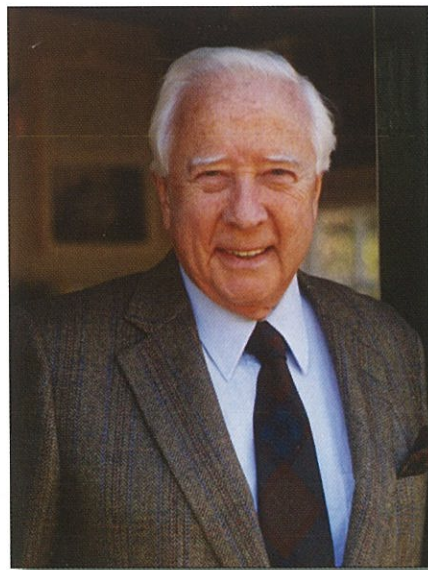
# History and Knowing Who We Are

**Learning about history is an antidote to the hubris of the present, the idea that everything in our lives is the ultimate.**

**BY DAVID MCCULLOUGH**

**F**ORMER PRESIDENT HARRY S. TRUMAN once remarked that the history we don't know is the only new thing in the world. Picking up on a related theme, the late Daniel Boorstin, an eminent historian, Librarian of Congress, and friend of mine, wrote that planning for the future without a sense of the past is similar to planting cut flowers and hoping for the best. Today, the new generation of young Americans are like a field of cut flowers, by-and-large historically illiterate. This does not bode well for our future.

After delivering a talk at the University of Missouri, I spoke with a young woman who said that until my talk she had not known that all of the original 13 colonies were on the east coast. How could a student at a fine university not know this, I wondered. On another occasion, I taught an honors seminar to 25 history majors at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire. The first morning I asked if anyone could identify George Marshall. Not a single person raised their hand. After a long silence, one young man asked tentatively if he had something to do with the Marshall Plan. Yes, I said. And that's where we started talking about the General who supervised the U.S. Army during World War II and later received the Nobel Prize as Secretary of State. We cannot, however, blame these



students for their lack of understanding and awareness of history.

All of us who are educators, parents, and writers bear a great responsibility: We must communicate to the younger generation that Americans—as individuals but also collectively as a nation—cannot truly know who we are or where we are going unless we know where we have been. We should value what our forebears—and that includes our own parents and grandparents—have done for us; otherwise our history will simply slip away. If we inherit an old oil painting and no one tells us that it is a priceless work of art, then we'll probably lose interest in it, either sticking it in a closet or selling it. Of course, history is not static like a painting, but eternally fascinating, because events and people can be freshly

examined with new techniques and perspectives. Each generation, we peel back biases that have blinded those before us. The more we know about the past enables us to ask richer and more provocative questions about who we are today. We also must tell the next generation one of the great truths of history: that no past event was preordained. Every battle, election, and revolution could have turned out differently at any point along the way, just as a person's own life can change unpredictably. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, a fact that is not as self-evident as it might sound, particularly to a young person.

And we would do well to remind young people that nobody ever lived in the past. Jefferson, Adams, and Washington did not walk around thinking, "Isn't it fascinating living in the past?" They lived in the present, of course, just as we do today, every bit uncertain of the future as we are. How easy it is for historians and biographers—or any of us—to look backward in time and judge the actions of others. Yet we are not making those tough decisions in real time with definite uncertainties.

We Americans are infatuated with the idea of the self-made man or woman, but there is no such creature. Every person has been affected, changed, shaped,

helped, and hindered by others. Each of us knows people who've opened for us a window into a new world, inspired us, praised our efforts, provided us with a sense of direction, and straightened us out when we've strayed. Most often they have been our parents, but almost as frequently they have been teachers, changing our lives perhaps with a single sentence, a lecture, or by just taking an interest in your struggle. Family, teachers, friends, rivals, and competitors have all shaped us. So, too, have those who lived long before us. Think about symphony composers, painters, poets, and writers of great literature: We walk around every day quoting Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Pope without even knowing it. We believe that it's our way of speaking, but it's actually what we have been given.

The laws that govern us, the freedoms we enjoy, the institutions that we often unfortunately take for granted, represent the hard work of others stretching back far into the past. Acting indifferent to this fact does not just smack of ignorance, but rudeness. How can we claim indifference to learning about those people who made it possible for us to become citizens of the world's greatest country? The freedoms we enjoy are not just a birthright, but something for which millions have struggled, suffered, and died.

## Character and Destiny

None of the writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia during that fateful summer of 1776 were superhuman; each had flaws, failings, and weaknesses. Some ardently disliked others. All said and did things he regretted. Yet the fact that these imperfect human beings rose to the occasion and performed as they did testifies to their humanity. It is our ability then and now to rise to the occasion and exhibit our strengths—not our failings, weaknesses, and sins—that define us as Americans.

In the 19th century, a German-born engineer named John Fritz, working at the Cambria Iron Company in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, captured this spirit,

when, after working for months to finish the first Bessemer steel machinery in this country, came into the plant one morning and said, "Alright, boys, let's start her up and see why she doesn't work." The desire to find out what's not working, fix it, and then maybe get it to work is an American quality and our guiding star. The founding fathers had no prior experience in revolutions or nation-making. The faces of these men, framed by powdered hair and marked by awkward-looking teeth, stare out from old paintings

## The freedoms we enjoy represent the hard work of others stretching back far into the past

and the money in our wallets, like elder statesmen. But, when George Washington took command of the continental army at Cambridge in 1775, he was 43 years old, the oldest of the lot. Jefferson penned the Declaration at 33, while John Adams signed it 40. Benjamin Rush—a founder of the antislavery movement in Philadelphia and one of the most interesting founding fathers—was only 30 years old. Without money and lacking a navy or substantial army, these young people felt their way, improvising at every step, what we call today, "winging it." Their little country clung to a fringe of settlement along the east coast and contained only 2,500,000 people, 500,000 of whom were slaves. They had not one single bank and only one bridge stood between New York and Boston. What a good story! Almost no nation in the world knows how and when it was born with the detail we do.

In the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol hangs John Trumbull's great painting, "The Declaration of Independence, Fourth of July, 1776," which has been viewed by more people than any other American painting and represents the best known scene from our past. Almost nothing about the painting is accurate,

including the title. Our founding fathers began signing the document, not on July 4th, but on August 2nd, and it took months for everyone to make it to Philadelphia and affix their signature. Trumbull painted the wrong chairs, placed doors incorrectly, decorated windows with made-up heavy draperies, and entirely imagined the display of military flags and banners on the back wall. He did, however, accurately capture the likenesses of all 42 signers and five other patriots, and thus made them accountable. Trumbull wanted us never to forget them, because this momentous step was not the act of a potentate, king, or czar, but the decision of a Congress acting freely.

## Our Failure, Our Duty

There's no secret to teaching history well or making it interesting. Barbara Tuchman summed up what every teacher, parent, and writer should know in two words: "Tell stories." E.M. Forster gave a wonderful definition of story. If you say that the king died and then the queen, that is a sequence of events. However, if you say that the king died and then the queen died of grief, then that becomes a story, because it calls for empathy on the part of both the storyteller and the listener. We need historians who have the heart and humanity necessary to help students imagine the lives of people who have lived in the past and were just as human as we are today.

Learning about history is an antidote to the hubris of the present, the idea that everything in our lives is the ultimate. Recently, while going through the Panama Canal, I couldn't help but reflect on the talent, ingenuity, and resilience of the American builders under John Stevens and George Goethals, who built that great path between two oceans in the early 20th century: the stupendous amount of information they had to absorb; their dependence on such a diversity of talent; their creative responses to a series of frequent and unexpected breakdowns, landslides, and floods. They built the canal under budget and finished before the deadline. It still runs today exactly



as it did when it first opened in 1914. By present-day standards, these men did not even understand the chemistry of making concrete. Yet when engineers today drill into those concrete locks, they find little if any deterioration. We do not know how they did it. The giant, hollow gates work because they float. The electric motors controlling the gates use power generated by water from the spillway from the very dam that creates the lake, which bridges the isthmus. It is engineering at its best—human creations working with nature. We could not do it any better today, and probably not as well. Take a look, for example, at the “Big Dig” in Boston today: we are not closer to the angels nearly a hundred years later.

## Listening To The Past

Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that we should read history because it helps us behave better. So, too, we ought to read history because it breaks down dividers between the disciplines of science, medicine, philosophy, art, and music, which is all part of the human story. History enables us to understand the interconnections. Understanding the 18th century, for example, depends on familiarity with its vocabulary, because their words often mean something different than they do today. In a letter that John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail, “We can’t guarantee success in this war, but we can do something better. We can deserve it.” The word “deserve” has such a different meaning today when all that matters is success, getting ahead, and rising to the top.

Adams’ letter indicates that while God controls the outcome of the war, the colonists can control how they behave. They can “deserve” success. That line practically lifted me out of my chair when I first read it. Three weeks later I found the same word in George Washington’s correspondence. It occurred to me that they both were quoting somebody else. I pulled down *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* from the bookshelf and scanned entries from the 18th century. Bingo, I found it in Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato*. Adams,



Washington, and others were quoting the language of the time, a kind of secular creed if you will. It is impossible to fathom their behavior without knowing why honor mattered so much that they put their lives and fortunes on the line for it. Those were not just words.

We hear talk frequently these days about the difficult, dangerous times we live in. Yet our nation has lived through darker times, although this is not evident

listening to those who broadcast the news. The year 1776 was perhaps the darkest time in our history. Or what about the first months of 1942 after Pearl Harbor when German submarines sank our oil tankers in plain sight off the coasts of Florida and New Jersey? Our recruits drilled with wooden rifles. Our air force did not exist, and the navy was badly hurt. The Nazi machine looked unstoppable. After Pearl Harbor, when Winston Churchill crossed





the Atlantic and gave a magnificent speech, saying that we had not journeyed this far because we were made of sugar candy. It's as true today as it ever was.

History is not just a subject that ought to be taught or read because it will make us a better citizen, although it will. Nor should we encourage young people to embrace history only because it create more thoughtful and understanding human beings. Nor should we only share

stories about the past because we will be have better. History should be taught for pleasure. The joy of history, like art or music or literature, consists of an expansion of the experience of being alive. And that is what education is largely about. 🦅

Adapted from a speech given by the author. Courtesy of *Imprimis*, a publication of Hillsdale College, Phoenix, AZ.

*Good history can take us by surprise. For generations, John Trumbull's famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence shaped our view of the founding fathers as elder statesmen. In fact, these remarkable men were relatively young, with no experience in revolution or nation-building. A 33-year-old Jefferson drafted the Declaration; John Adams signed it at 40. George Washington commanded the Continental Army at 43.*



Reading

## **Religion in Colonial America: Trends, Regulations, and Beliefs**

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To understand how America's current balance among national law, local community practice, and individual freedom of belief evolved, it's helpful to understand some of the common experiences and patterns around religion in colonial culture in the period between 1600 and 1776.

In the early years of what later became the United States, Christian religious groups played an influential role in each of the British colonies, and most attempted to enforce strict religious observance through both colony governments and local town rules.

Most attempted to enforce strict religious observance. Laws mandated that everyone attend a house of worship and pay taxes that funded the salaries of ministers. Eight of the thirteen British colonies had official, or "established," churches, and in those colonies dissenters who sought to practice or proselytize a different version of Christianity or a non-Christian faith were sometimes persecuted.

Although most colonists considered themselves Christians, this did not mean that they lived in a culture of religious unity. Instead, differing Christian groups often believed that their own practices and faiths provided unique values that needed protection against those who disagreed, driving a need for rule and regulation.

In Europe, Catholic and Protestant nations often persecuted or forbade each other's religions, and British colonists frequently maintained restrictions against Catholics. In Great Britain, the Protestant Anglican church had split into bitter divisions among traditional Anglicans and the reforming Puritans, contributing to an English civil war in the 1600s. In the British colonies, differences among Puritan and Anglican remained.

Between 1680 and 1760 Anglicanism and Congregationalism, an offshoot of the English Puritan movement, established themselves as the main organized denominations in the majority of the colonies. As the seventeenth and eighteenth century passed on, however, the Protestant wing of Christianity constantly gave birth to new movements, such as the Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Unitarians and many more, sometimes referred to as "Dissenters." In communities where one existing faith was dominant, new congregations were often seen as unfaithful troublemakers who were upsetting the social order.



Despite the effort to govern society on Christian (and more specifically Protestant) principles, the first decades of colonial era in most colonies were marked by irregular religious practices, minimal communication between remote settlers, and a population of "Murderers, Theeves, Adulterers, [and] idle persons."<sup>1</sup> An ordinary Anglican American parish stretched between 60 and 100 miles, and was often very sparsely populated. In some areas, women accounted for no more than a quarter of the population, and given the relatively small number of conventional households and the chronic shortage of clergymen, religious life was haphazard and irregular for most. Even in Boston, which was more highly populated and dominated by the Congregational Church, one inhabitant complained in 1632 that the "fellows which keepe hogges all weeke preach on the Sabbath."<sup>2</sup>

Christianity was further complicated by the widespread practice of astrology, alchemy and forms of witchcraft. The fear of such practices can be gauged by the famous trials held in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 and 1693. Surprisingly, alchemy and other magical practices were not altogether divorced from Christianity in the minds of many "natural philosophers" (the precursors of scientists), who sometimes thought of them as experiments that could unlock the secrets of Scripture. As we might expect, established clergy discouraged these explorations.

In turn, as the colonies became more settled, the influence of the clergy and their churches grew. At the heart of most communities was the church; at the heart of the calendar was the Sabbath—a period of intense religious and "secular" activity that lasted all day long. After years of struggles to impose discipline and uniformity on Sundays, the selectmen of Boston at last were able to "parade the street and oblige everyone to go to Church . . . on pain of being put in Stokes or otherwise confined," one observer wrote in 1768.<sup>3</sup> By then, few communities openly tolerated travel, drinking, gambling, or blood sports on the Sabbath.

Slavery—which was also firmly established and institutionalized between the 1680s and the 1780s—was also shaped by religion. The use of violence against slaves, their social inequality, together with the settlers' contempt for all religions other than Christianity "resulted in destructiveness of extraordinary breadth, the loss of traditional religious practices among the half-millions slaves brought to the mainland colonies between 1680s and the American Revolution."<sup>4</sup> Even in churches which reached out to convert slaves to their congregations — the Baptists are a good example—slaves were most often a silent minority. If they received any Christian religious instructions, it was, more often than not, from their owners rather than in Sunday school.

Local variations in Protestant practices and ethnic differences among the white settlers did foster a religious diversity. Wide distances, poor communication and transportation, bad weather, and the clerical shortage dictated religious variety from town to town and from region to region. With French Huguenots, Catholics, Jews, Dutch Calvinists, German Reformed pietists, Scottish Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and other denominations arriving in growing numbers, most colonies with Anglican or Congregational establishments had little choice but to display some degree of religious tolerance. Only in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania was toleration rooted in principle rather than expedience. Indeed, Pennsylvania's first constitution stated that all who believed in God and agreed to live peacefully under the civil government

would "in no way be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion or practice."<sup>5</sup> However, reality often fell short of that ideal.

## New England

Most New Englanders went to a Congregationalist meetinghouse for church services. The meetinghouse, which served secular functions as well as religious, was a small wood building located in the center of town. People sat on hard wooden benches for most of the day, which was how long the church services usually lasted. These meeting houses became bigger and much less crude as the population grew after the 1660s. Steeples grew, bells were introduced, and some churches grew big enough to host as many as one thousand worshippers.

In contrast to other colonies, there was a meetinghouse in every New England town.<sup>6</sup> In 1750 Boston, a city with a population of 15000, had eighteen churches.<sup>7</sup> In the previous century church attendance was inconsistent at best. After the 1680s, with many more churches and clerical bodies emerging, religion in New England became more organized and attendance more uniformly enforced. In even sharper contrast to the other colonies, in New England most newborns were baptized by the church, and church attendance rose in some areas to 70 percent of the adult population. By the eighteenth century, the vast majority of *all* colonists were churchgoers.

The New England colonists—with the exception of Rhode Island—were predominantly Puritans, who, by and large, led strict religious lives. The clergy was highly educated and devoted to the study and teaching of both Scripture and the natural sciences. The Puritan leadership and gentry, especially in Massachusetts and Connecticut, integrated their version of Protestantism into their political structure. Government in these colonies contained elements of theocracy, asserting that leaders and officials derived that authority from divine guidance and that civil authority ought to be used to enforce religious conformity. Their laws assumed that citizens who strayed away from conventional religious customs were a threat to civil order and should be punished for their nonconformity.

Despite many affinities with the established Church of England, New England churches operated quite differently from the older Anglican system in England. Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut had no church courts to levy fines on religious offenders, leaving that function to the civil magistrates. Congregational churches typically owned no property (even the local meetinghouse was owned by the town and was used to conduct both town meetings and religious services), and ministers, while often called upon to advise the civil magistrates, played no *official* role in town or colony governments.

In those colonies, the civil government dealt harshly with religious dissenters, exiling the likes of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams for their outspoken criticism of Puritanism, and whipping Baptists or cropping the ears of Quakers for their determined efforts to proselytize. Official persecution reached its peak between 1659 and 1661, when Massachusetts Bay's Puritan magistrates hung four Quaker missionaries.

Yet, despite Puritanism's severe reputation, the actual experience of New England dissenters varied widely, and punishment of religious difference was uneven. England's intervention in 1682 ended the corporal punishment of dissenters in New England. The Toleration Act, passed

by the English Parliament in 1689, gave Quakers and several other denominations the right to build churches and to conduct public worship in the colonies. While dissenters continued to endure discrimination and financial penalties well into the eighteenth century, those who did not challenge the authority of the Puritans directly were left unmolested and were not legally punished for their "heretical" beliefs.

## Mid-Atlantic and Southern Colonies

Inhabitants of the middle and southern colonies went to churches whose style and decoration look more familiar to modern Americans than the plain New England meeting houses. They, too, would sit in church for most of the day on Sunday. After 1760, as remote outposts grew into towns and backwoods settlements became bustling commercial centers, Southern churches grew in size and splendor. Church attendance, abysmal as it was in the early days of the colonial period, became more consistent after 1680. Much like the north, this was the result of the proliferation of churches, new clerical codes and bodies, and a religion that became more organized and uniformly enforced. Toward the end of the colonial era, churchgoing reached at least 60 percent in all the colonies.

The middle colonies saw a mixture of religions, including Quakers (who founded Pennsylvania), Catholics, Lutherans, a few Jews, and others. The southern colonists were a mixture as well, including Baptists and Anglicans. In the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland (which was originally founded as a haven for Catholics), the Church of England was recognized by law as the state church, and a portion of tax revenues went to support the parish and its priest.

Virginia imposed laws obliging all to attend Anglican public worship. Indeed, to any eighteenth observer, the "legal and social dominance of the Church of England was unmistakable."<sup>8</sup> After 1750, as Baptist ranks swelled in that colony, the colonial Anglican elite responded to their presence with force. Baptist preachers were frequently arrested. Mobs physically attacked members of the sect, breaking up prayer meetings and sometimes beating participants. As a result, the 1760s and 1770s witnessed a rise in discontent and discord within the colony (some argue that Virginian dissenters suffered some of the worst persecutions in antebellum America).<sup>9</sup>

In the Carolinas, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware, Anglicans never made up a majority, in contrast to Virginia. With few limits on the influx of new colonists, Anglican citizens in those colonies needed to accept, however grudgingly, ethnically diverse groups of Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, members of the Dutch Reformed Church, and a variety of German Pietists.

Maryland was founded by Cecilius Calvert in 1634 as a safe haven for Catholics. The Catholic leadership passed a law of religious toleration in 1649, only to see it repealed it when Puritans took over the colony's assembly. Clergy and buildings belonging to both the Catholic and Puritan religions were subsidized by a general tax.

Quakers founded Pennsylvania. Their faith influenced the way they treated Indians, and they were the first to issue a public condemnation of slavery in America. William Penn, the founder of the colony, contended that civil authorities shouldn't meddle with the religious/spiritual lives of their citizens. The laws he drew up pledged to protect the civil liberties of "all persons . . .



who confess and acknowledge the one almighty and eternal God to be the creator, upholder, and ruler of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

## Religious Revival

A religious revival swept the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. Shortly after the English evangelical and revivalist George Whitefield completed a tour of America, Jonathan Edwards delivered a sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” stirring up a wave of religious fervor and the beginning of the Great Awakening. Relying on massive open-air sermons attended at times by as many as 15,000 people, the movement challenged the clerical elite and colonial establishment by focusing on the sinfulness of every individual, and on salvation through personal, emotional conversion—what we call today being “born again.” By discounting worldly success as a sign of God’s favor, and by focusing on emotional transformation (pejoratively dubbed by the establishment as “enthusiasm”) rather than reason, the movement appealed to the poor and uneducated, including slaves and Indians.

In retrospect, the Great Awakening contributed to the revolutionary movement in a number of ways: it forced Awakeners to organize, mobilize, petition, and provided them with political experience; it encouraged believers to follow their beliefs even if that meant breaking with their church; it discarded clerical authority in matters of conscience; and it questioned the right of civil authority to intervene in all matters of religion. In a surprising way, these principles sat very well with the basic beliefs of rational Protestants (and deists). They also helped clarify their common objections to British civil and religious rule over the colonies, and provided both with arguments in favor of the separation of church and state.

## Rationalism

Despite the evangelical, emotional challenge to reason underlying the “Great Awakening,” by the end of the colonial period, Protestant rationalism remained the dominant religious force among the leaders of most of the colonies: “The similarity of belief among the educated gentry in all colonies is notable. . . . [There] seem to be evidence that some form of rationalism—Unitarian, deist, or otherwise—was often present in the religion of gentlemen leaders by the late colonial period.”<sup>11</sup> Whether Unitarian, deist, or even Anglican/Congregational, rationalism focused on the ethical aspects of religion. Rationalism also discarded many “superstitious” aspects of the Christian liturgy (although many continued to believe in the human soul and in the afterlife). The political edge of this argument was that no human institution—religious or civil—could claim divine authority. In addition, in their search for God’s truths, rationalists such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin valued the study of nature (known as “natural religion”) over the Scriptures (or “revealed religion”).

At the core of this rational belief was the idea that God had endowed humans with reason so that they could tell the difference between right and wrong. Knowing the difference also meant that humans made free choices to sin or behave morally. The radicalization of this position led many rational dissenters to argue that intervention in human decisions by civil authorities undermined the special covenant between God and humankind. Many therefore advocated the separation of church and state.

Taken further, the logic of these arguments led them to dismiss the divine authority claimed by the English kings, as well as the blind obedience compelled by such authority. Thus, by the 1760s, they mounted a two-pronged attack on England: first, for its desire to intervene in the colonies' religious life and, second, for its claim that the king ruled over the colonies by divine inspiration. Once the link to divine authority was broken, revolutionaries turned to Locke, Milton, and others, concluding that a government that abused its power and hurt the interests of its subjects was tyrannical and as such deserved to be replaced.

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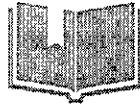
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<https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/religion-colonial-america-trends-regulations-and-beliefs>

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## Reading 6

**Inventing Black and White**[Share to Google Classroom](#)

In Virginia in the 1600s, Anthony Johnson secured his freedom from indentured servitude, acquired land, and became a respected member of his community. Elizabeth Key successfully appealed to the colony's legal system to set her free after she had been wrongfully enslaved. By the 1700s, the laws and customs of Virginia had begun to distinguish *black* people from *white* people, making it impossible for most Virginians of African descent to do what Johnson and Key had done.

Why did Virginia lawmakers make these changes? Many historians point to an event known as Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 as a turning point. Nathaniel Bacon was a wealthy white property owner and relative of Virginia's governor, William Berkeley. But Bacon and Berkeley did not like each other, and they disagreed over issues pertaining to how the colony should be governed, including the colony's policy toward Native Americans. Bacon wanted the colony to retaliate for raids by Native Americans on frontier settlements and to remove all Native Americans from the colony so landowners like himself could expand their property. Berkeley feared that doing so would unite all of the nearby tribes in a costly and destructive war against the colony. In defiance of the governor, Bacon organized his own militia, consisting of white and black indentured servants and enslaved black people, who joined in exchange for freedom, and attacked nearby tribes. A power struggle ensued with Bacon and his militia on one side and Berkeley, the Virginia House of Burgesses, and the rest of the colony's elite on the other. Months of conflict followed, including armed skirmishes between militias. In September 1676, Bacon's militia captured Jamestown and burned it to the ground.

Although Bacon died of fever a month later and the rebellion fell apart, Virginia's wealthy planters were shaken by the fact that a rebel militia that united white and black servants and slaves had destroyed the colonial capital. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander writes:

The events in Jamestown were alarming to the planter elite, who were deeply fearful of the multiracial alliance of [indentured servants] and slaves. Word of Bacon's Rebellion spread far and wide, and several more uprisings of a similar type followed. In an effort to protect their superior status and economic position, the planters shifted their strategy for maintaining dominance. They abandoned their heavy reliance on indentured servants in favor of the importation of more black slaves.<sup>1</sup>

After Bacon's Rebellion, Virginia's lawmakers began to make legal distinctions between "white" and "black" inhabitants. By permanently enslaving Virginians of African descent and giving poor white indentured servants and farmers some new rights and status, they hoped to separate the two groups and make it less likely that they would unite again in rebellion. Historian Ira Berlin explains:

Soon after Bacon's Rebellion they increasingly distinguish between people of African descent and people of European descent. They enact laws which say that people of African descent are hereditary slaves. And they increasingly give some power to independent white farmers and land holders . . .

Now what is interesting about this is that we normally say that slavery and freedom are opposite things—that they are diametrically opposed. But what we see here in Virginia in the late 17th century, around Bacon's Rebellion, is that freedom and slavery are created at the same moment.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first appearance in print of the adjective *white* in reference to "a white man, a person of a race distinguished by a light complexion" was in 1671. Colonial charters and other official documents written in the 1600s and early 1700s rarely refer to European colonists as white.

As the status of people of African descent in the British colonies was challenged and attacked, and as white indentured servants were given new rights and status, the word *white* continued to be more widely used in public documents and private papers to describe the European colonists. People of European descent were considered white, and those of African descent were labeled black. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley explains:

Many of the European-descended poor whites began to identify themselves, if not directly with the rich whites, certainly with being white. And here you get the emergence of this idea of a white race as a way to distinguish themselves from those dark-skinned people who they associate with perpetual slavery.<sup>3</sup>

The division in American society between black and white that began in the late 1600s had devastating consequences for African Americans as slavery became an institution that flourished for centuries. Lawyer and civil rights activist Bryan Stevenson explains:

[S]lavery deprived the enslaved person of any legal rights or autonomy and granted the slave owner complete power over the black men, women, and children legally recognized as property . . .

American slavery was often brutal, barbaric, and violent. In addition to the hardship of forced labor, enslaved people were maimed or killed by slave owners as punishment for working too slowly, visiting a spouse living on another plantation, or even learning to read. Enslaved people were also sexually exploited.<sup>4</sup>

Leaders and scientists from the United States and around the world would increasingly rely on the supposed differences between the black and white races to justify the brutal and inhuman treatment of slaves.