

Norfolk State Historians Bring 1619: Making of America Summit to NSU

Sparks new discussion about the African-American Experience

By Sharon Riddick Hoggard ('04)

Find the word *passion* in the dictionary and you'd find a photo of Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, dean of the College of Liberal Arts. She and her husband, professor of history Dr. William Alexander, worked diligently for nearly a decade to bring the **1619: Making of America Summit** to Norfolk State University. Hold a conversation with Dr. Newby-Alexander and you gain an education in addition to valuable history lessons.

When asked what the significance of developing and hosting the 1619: Making of America Summit the dean said, "I want the African-American narrative to be reflective of historical fact. Our narrative is wrong in many ways, so it is important that the body of knowledge continues to expand and connect our origins." According to the *New York Times* 1619 Project, Newby-Alexander's premise is spot on. The Times wrote of their 1619 series, "It aims to reframe the country's history – understanding 1619 as the true founding and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are."¹

Providing an example about the African-American narrative, Newby-Alexander recounted a common misconception about American history . . . that slavery was strictly confined to the southern states. "Slavery existed in the north for half of the antebellum period. New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania set up time and age limits to end slavery. Massachusetts eliminated slavery through the court system."

Reflecting on yet another "historical misperception" that may have shaped how we see ourselves as Americans and African-Americans, the dean stated, "Pull out a map – what is in the center – the United States. The U.S. boundaries are skewed to make it look larger. The continental U.S. is about the same size as West Africa. Germany is the size of as most of our medium-sized states. These kinds of things have played in how we see ourselves and in our narrative. All of these myths have been perpetuated for years," the she exclaimed.

Newby-Alexander was appointed to the 2019 Commemorative Commission and was asked to co-chair the *Arrival of the First Africans* Committee. "Since 2012, we've been hosting academic conferences around this theme. We began to find funding and/or partners for the project," she acknowledged. The years of researching, organizing and planning came to fruition for two-and-a-half days in September. More than 350 people registered for various scheduled events. "Three hundred and fifty people registered. Throughout the day, we'd have 250 to 300 people coming and going for both day and evening events," Newby-Alexander verified. She added, "Excellent turn out for the first day's event – the HBCU storytellers. We had a lot of community people coming out; a lot of students attending after classes and had large numbers that came to the evening events."

Newby-Alexander was particularly proud of part of the summit that featured the Norfolk State University Theater. Her eyes lit up as she animatedly talked about the university theater's production of

¹ New York Times – 1619. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-american-slavery.html>.

Gem of the Ocean, a play by August Wilson . . . and a big hit with summit participants. “The play featured a *talk-back* with Riley Temple, noted critic and expert on August Wilson.” Temple knows the director of the Broadway production of *Gem of the Ocean* and actress Phylicia Rashad (The Cosby Show), who had the role of Aunt Esther. “Temple said he had seen good and bad productions of the play and the NSU Theater’s interpretation was the best! And, he was including the Broadway production.” She continued to explain the critic’s points, adding that Temple loved the ways in which the theatre company interpreted the different scenes. Temple also noted that when reading the play, Aunt Esther is not spelled in the way you normally see it. Normally it’s seen as E-S-T-H-E-R, but if you put the two words together – Aunt Esther – it really spells the *ancestor*. “Aunt Esther was the ancestor who would remind blacks where they came from and their origin stories. Aunt Esther was born in 1619. That’s why we wanted that particular play performed. By the end of the performance, it has a sad ending and tears were just flowing. And to know, that the actors were so young. Aunt Esther’s character was 21 years old and the villain was 18. They were amazing! It was an excellent talk-back.”

“The summit was the culmination of seven years of having conferences looking at this topic of what is the meaning of 1619. Who are we as Americans? Sixteen-nineteen was when founders of the Virginia colony decided that it would be a colony that would not only survive . . . but thrive. They created a limited legislative body that became the Virginia General assembly and created the court system. We charged ourselves with finding new information about our real history,” Newby-Alexander affirmed. The dean pointed out that the idea behind the summit was to bring scholars together to talk about each of these issues. Four panels were developed and each group would address topics including:

- What are we trying to create in new representations of people of color?
- How are we trying to reframe the history of African-Americans?
- How are we looking at our family roots here in America?
- How do we look at law and citizenship?
- What efforts are being made to reframe our narrative?

“These themes are the culmination of how we were looking at 1619, and not just that year, but moving forward. Now let’s have a conversation from the experts, who were involved in reframing and finding information about our real history and real family roots. Because some of the descendants of people who were brought here forcibly in 1619, their descendants were living as white people because they disappeared within white society through intermarriage. And so, are we who we think we are?”

Newby-Alexander explains further that the 1619 Summit begins the next phase of pushing to rewrite the narrative and to encourage other scholars to rewrite the stories that would be shared in public schools. “Slavery dominated our law,” she added, “but there is not one course taught anywhere in the country on slavery and the law.” She notes that case law was evolving when it came to handling blacks and permanent servants who committed a crime. “In 1669, laws allowed for the casual killing of any slave who resisted. In 1672, any white person could kill any black person. These laws stripped blacks of their humanity. We must make sure that we stop glossing over these parts of our history,” she ended.

Summit organizers curated a diverse host of speakers and scholars to participate in an effort to achieve a balance of differing voices . . . different ideas and various perspectives. “We wanted to be inclusive of all these different voices – to ensure all these different voices were included and heard.”

When asked about the lasting impact of the **1619 Summit: The Making of America**, Newby-Alexander thoughtfully reflected, smiled and expressed satisfaction. “We recorded it. My hope is that it will be used by educators as a way to start a conversation, or eventually looking back and seeing where these conversations and ideas originated. In going around the country and making presentations on the topic, I found that people just don’t know. People are telling me that they saw a broadcast or a presentation and that they learned a lot and loved it!” And, the *learning* continues to be the ultimate goal.

C-Span picked up the story and covered the 1619 event at Fort Monroe, and the 1619 subject was the topic of a podcast produced for the Roland Martin show titled *were the first Africans who arrived in Virginia in 1619 indentured servants or were they enslaved?* Additionally, a film will produced for the Center for African-American Public Policy, in partnership with Nate Parker’s HBCU Storyteller Group (a summit panel).

Articles about 1619 appeared all across the country in various media including:

- USA Today – *1619*
- New York Times - *1619*
- The Washington Post – *Before 1619*
- USA Today – *Slavery’s Explosive Growth in Charts: How ‘20 and Odd’ Became Millions*
- The Atlantic – *The Hopefulness and Hopelessness of 1619*
- CBS News – *1619 Project Explores Legacy of Slavery*

Newby-Alexander generated media coverage as well by participating in several major interviews including:

- Daily Press – *1619 Program for Educators*
- *Ben Franklin World on 1619* – Episode #250
- New Journal & Guide – *Africans in America*
- BET News – *1619 – 2019: From Trauma to Triumph*
- NBC News – *Angela Site Uncovers Details*
- WHRO Another View – *400 Years Later*
- Christian Science Monitor – *Untangling Slavery’s Roots*
- Essence Magazine – *1619*

“It’s a different level of outreach. The creative work we’re doing is more focused. We want to create a holistic product so that students will see the field from a larger vantage point – learning to problem solve and work in teams.”

The dean disclosed that the level outreach also includes:

- Highlighting the voice of African-Americans and the African-American experience through drama and the written word
- Creating a database of scholars and resources
- Publishing op-ed articles
- Creating documentaries, docudramas
- Creating new learning opportunities for students via internships

“We are preparing students for the future. The way we approach these topics are the way we imagine and reimagine ourselves,” Newby-Alexander concluded.

The beginnings of a contemporary African-American historic narrative has begun – launched from Norfolk State University.