

V. American History As a Story of Rights

A. The Story of Rights

1. Modern Americans disagree about rights. Many people consider the election of Barack Obama (an African-American) as president as an important part of the story of rights. However, Americans appeared to reject president Obama's ideas about rights by electing Donald Trump after him.
2. Learning the *story* of rights is how we can understand where these disagreements come from.
3. Before modern times the only people that were considered to have any "rights" were kings. There was a theory that explained that kings had a "*divine right*" to rule other human beings. Normal people thus had no rights!
4. Other than ancient Greece and Rome, the only country where real progress had been made in terms of rights for anyone other than kings was England. In 1215, the English forced their king to accept limits on his power known as *Magna Carta*. Thus English culture had certain protections for the individual, known as the "rights of Englishmen."
5. The original American view is that rights are part of human nature. They are "natural" rights, and that human beings possess them as an "inalienable" part of their existence. ("Inalienable" means that rights cannot be taken away from you.)
6. In addition to the American theory there is a modern European theory says that human beings lose their "natural rights" when they join society and become "citizens." When they do that, they get new ones given by society, called social or "civil" rights.
7. Modern thinking is typically divided between *natural* and *civil* rights. If your not sure which are "natural" and which are "social" when you hear about them, that's OK. Learning American history as a story of rights will help you figure it out.

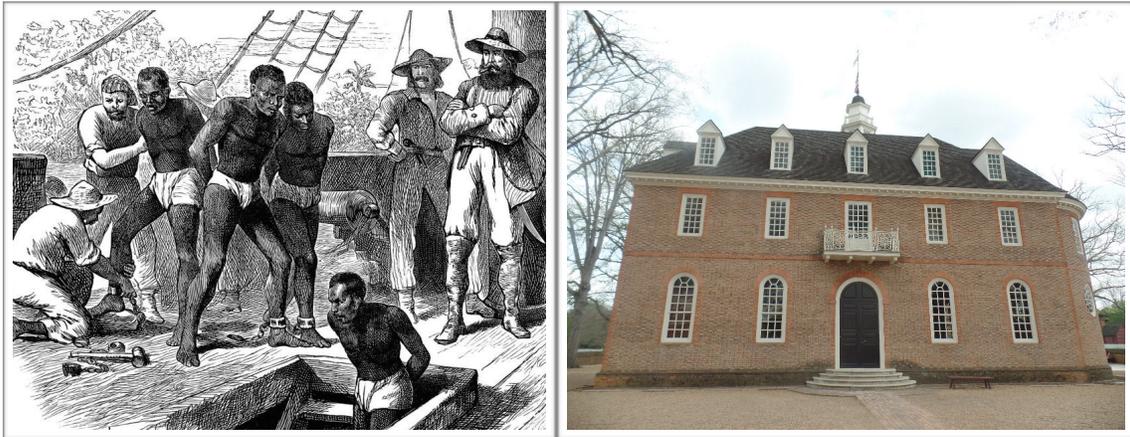


The differences between America's most recent presidents, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, illustrate the divisions and disagreements of Americans when it comes to their own government, including what rights it should defend and/or promote.

B. Colonization and the American Inheritance from Europe

1. As we have already seen, America became the country that it is because it was colonized by the English starting in **1607**, and because the English defeated France in the Seven Years' War (**1756-63**).
2. If we look at the same part of the story as a story of rights, we see how America inherited two ideas about rights from England
3. The first view, sadly, was that slavery is normal.
 - a) After Columbus had discovered America in **1492**, the Europeans conquered the primitive natives, and many natives also died from disease.
 - b) Finding that there weren't enough people that they could force to work for them, the Spanish and Portuguese began to bring slaves from Africa. This *Atlantic Slave Trade* — bringing slaves across the *Atlantic Ocean*—began in **1526**.

- c) It is important to understand how normal slavery was. Indeed most Europeans were “serfs,” a kind of slave who labored on land he did not own for powerful lords who controlled his life almost completely. When the European lords and kings who controlled exploration arrived in America, they simply attempted to copy the life they knew in Europe in America.
 - d) When the English began to colonize America at Jamestown they did not yet have slaves, but many of the colonists lived lives very similar to slaves.
 - e) Most *colonists* could not afford to come to America themselves. *Colonizers*, looking for people to “plant” in their colonies, agreed to pay for the passage of *colonists* if colonists agreed to become “indentured servants.”
 - f) Indentured servants had to work for someone else for as many as seven years. As we have seen, *death* was a very normal outcome during the early years of settlement. Very few colonists survived their early years to become free men.
4. As more English colonists arrived in America, however, they expected to have an English government to protect their rights.
- a) After the Magna Carta of 1215, Englishmen expected to have a “parliament,” where representatives of the people could “parley” (talk) with the king.
 - b) The Virginia colony had a charter from the king that granted permission to create a parliament, which was established in **1619**. It was known as the “House of Burgesses.” (The word “burgess” means a city-dweller.)
6. So **1619** is an anchor fact of colonial American history in two regards. It was the year of the creation of the first parliament in the Americas. It was also the first year that a shipment of slaves from Africa was brought to North America.



The *Atlantic Slave Trade*, begun by the Portuguese in **1526** resulted in the inheritance of slavery being passed on to America by Europe, starting in **1619**, with the first African slave shipment to North America. In **1619**, fortunately, the tradition of the rights of Englishmen also helped transmit the idea of individual rights to America at the same, with the founding of the *House of Burgesses*.