

Myths

Written by Fred Easter

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Nobody asked me, but since it is still African-American History Month; I thought I'd take a crack at some of the myths about slavery and slaves.

The movies like to depict the great plantations with their verandas and columns and rows of slave quarters way out back. Clearly, those places existed. But 80% of slaves were held by men who owned 5 or fewer. So, there were far fewer "house Negroes" than you may have thought. And, in the main, white southerners worked and lived "with" their slaves.

Slave owners and southern politicians created the myth that slaves were intellectually, emotionally and socially inferior to whites. They touted us as childlike and themselves as the brainy adults. BUT, Alex Haley, in his research for the book ROOTS, discovered advertisements, in Maryland and South Carolina newspapers of the period, which read: "ship arriving Tuesday from The Gambia with a consignment of slaves. Many are well versed in the cultivation of rice". So, not only did slaves arrive with important, useful knowledge and skills; knowledge of those skill sets was carefully researched and often preceded us to these shores.

Consider the story of James Griffin. He was a slave in Virginia during the 2nd half of the 18th century. As the outbreak of the Revolutionary War loomed; he was charged, by white land/slave owners, with the responsibility of designing the plans for the battlements that would protect the Virginia colony from attack from the sea. At that time, England had the world's largest and strongest navy.

Griffin produced the blueprints, oversaw the construction of the battlements and commanded the troops who manned those battlements throughout the war. When the Revolutionary War ended, Griffin was returned to his "master".

Ironically, in 1865, slaves got the opportunity to fight another war for their freedom in America. England abolished slavery throughout The British Empire in 1833.

James Griffin was born in Africa. Even though The College of William and Mary (the 2nd oldest college in the U.S) was operating in 1776; we can be certain Griffin didn't learn architecture there. Not only were "Negroes" not admitted to William and Mary at that time; it was against the law to teach one to read.