

# Your Resident Historian

V I S I T U S A T Y O U R R E S I D E N T H I S T O R I A N . C O M

### 3 FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- 1 in 3 black men are likely to go to prison, while 1 in 17 white men are likely to go to prison.\*
- Mass incarceration has little impact on public safety or crime rates.\*
- There has been a 500% increase in the prison and jail populations in the last 40 years.\*

\*Info retrieved from The Sentencing Project (<https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>)

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### FEATURED REVIEW: THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS

If I were asked to sum up Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* in one word, I would say it was *haunting*. A statement that we hear very often today is that we live in a post-racial era. Michelle Alexander, in less than 300 pages, shows us very clearly that we do not live in a post-racial era. Not only do we not live in a post-racial era, but we are living in an era that she has defined as "The New Jim Crow".

Michelle Alexander argues that the system of mass incarceration, which has infamously swept up astonishingly large numbers of Black and brown people since the War on Drugs began, has created a racial undercaste, one that in some aspects is far worse than the Jim Crow laws of yesterday. She further argues that we live in an age of colorblindness. It is no longer legal to discriminate against people based on color. But what happens if we remove any inclination that race is a motivating factor when someone gets swept up in the criminal justice system? The answer is simple, we end up with a horrifying number of black and brown people who end up in the criminal justice system and upon their release are relegated to second-class citizenship.

Once you are labeled a felon, it is perfectly legal to be discriminated against for housing, government assistance, and employment, among other things.

The amount of detail, statistics, independent studies, and overall information that Alexander includes to prove that we are in an age where the criminal justice system has been fabricated to ensure that people of color remain just as they were 50 years ago is staggering. While the statistics on the number of blacks versus whites that find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system is jarring and readily available, just seeing the numbers alone does not do one's view of the system justice.

Michelle Alexander's book is necessary and important. It sheds light on the fact that racism still exists in our country today, should there be anyone that doubts this. It shows that being colorblind, which many believe is the solution, is actually the problem. Alexander states, "Saying that one does not care about race is offered as an exculpatory virtue, when in fact it can be a form of cruelty. It is precisely because we, as a nation, have not cared much about African Americans that we have allowed our criminal justice system to create a new racial undercaste." It is now up to us to challenge this system, to challenge those that believe in and support the system, in order to even attempt to reform it in a manner that does not allow people of color to fall victim to it.

### UPCOMING ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

Coming up in August/September

-Review of the Culture and Community Galleries at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

-Article: Slavery in the Chesapeake Region

-History of Slave Rebellions—A Virtual History

-Researching Your Ancestors—A How-To Video

## INTERVIEW WITH A BLACK POLICE OFFICER

The relationship between the Black community and law enforcement has, for the most part, been a difficult one to navigate. Despite the fact that on paper Blacks have equal rights, it often seems that the criminal justice system is disproportionately biased in its treatment of Black individuals who find themselves involved in interactions with law enforcement. Even a simple traffic stop can end with a life lost. Sandra Bland. Even when Blacks are doing something that many Whites have done before them, such as lawfully carry a firearm with a concealed carry permit, they have found themselves dead. Philando Castile. Unfortunately, it is not just with law enforcement that Blacks find themselves often fearing for their lives. Ordinary citizens have taken it upon themselves to act as both judge and jury, seemingly without any consequences. Trayvon Martin. Even children, playing in the park, like so many other young boys and girls have become a hashtag. Tamir Rice.

So how, as a community, can we trust those who are supposed to protect and serve? I reached out to a Black officer I know. He agreed to be interviewed on the basis of anonymity. I wanted to speak with a Black officer, because I wanted to hear the perspective of not only an officer, but a Black man. Black men are often the target of police and I felt that his thoughts on the state of relations today between the Black community and law enforcement would be valuable. Please be mindful that his thoughts and opinions are his own and in no way should be used to paint the entire criminal justice system, including law enforcement with a broad brush.

### ***How did you decide to pursue a career in law enforcement?***

I have an uncle who was in law enforcement. I was actually working for the government. He kept telling me to try it, and I was reluctant for the first couple of years and then where I was I decided I wanted to make a job change. So, I decided to pursue law enforcement, which turned out to be a pretty good decision.

### ***How long have you been a police officer?***

I do training now, but I was a member of the SWAT team for 20 years. We do scenario-based training and we train the entire department. It's mandatory that everybody comes through once a year.

### ***As a young black man in D.C., before you became a police officer, did you have any experiences with law enforcement?***

Growing up in my era it was officer friendly, it was what was taught in the schools. Being a police officer was a well-respected profession. I never encountered the negative side of law enforcement, although some of my relatives, of course, had negative encounters. It was one of those things, they chose to do the things they did—which resulted in their negative encounters with police officers. I was always respectful of police officers, it was how I was raised by my parents.

***In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander is arguing that mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow. Essentially, every system of oppression, once it has legally ended, it has not actually ended but has transformed into some other form of oppression. Following the end of slavery, we had Jim Crow. Following the end of Jim Crow, we now have mass incarceration. We are seeing an increase in the incarceration of black and brown bodies for minor infractions, including possession of small amounts of marijuana intended for personal usage.***

Marijuana was always for recreational use. It does appear that now things have changed and it kind of favors Caucasians, because you know they just as well indulge in the activity of marijuana usage. But it appears for the black race that we are actually the ones being incarcerated for marijuana usage. The laws changed recently, in the last 4 or 5 years, which kind of caters to Caucasians because now with all the marijuana facilities coming up, they [Caucasians] are capitalizing off of that. They are making money off of that, whereas blacks are being incarcerated for it. There is definitely a disparity.

***During the 80s, when Reagan was coming into office, that's when the War on Drugs was really being hyped up. Did you see an increase in police presence in the city because of that?***

Yes, I did. There was an increase, because then there was the heroine and crack-cocaine epidemic, so there was an increase in police presence and there was also an increase in drug usage.

***D.L. Hughley was on the View recently and something he said was "The police for us has never been about protecting and serving. They have been about keeping you [blacks] in your community where you belong and keeping you out of places you don't belong." He goes on to say, "Let me make this distinction, the same officers that patrol communities of wealth, aren't the same officers that patrol communities of color." Is there an internal battle for you? How do you reconcile being a police officer and being a black man? You are obviously supposed to be protecting and serving, but is there also an understanding that law enforcement disproportionately targets blacks?***

From my experience, I grew up in a low-income neighborhood. There are some good officers out there, there are some outstanding officers out there. But it's two-fold, I would say that it's training on the part of the police, but I would also say that it's compliance as far as the citizens and society goes. You asked me a question earlier about my experience, growing up officers were respected. That's the way it was. In my experience, if there is one bad police officer, we have the tendency to blanket the whole department. That person just so happens to be wearing the uniform that represents, so if he or she does something wrong then it's blanketed with the entire police department. Like I said, from my experience it's two-fold. Like with Black Lives Matter, I don't have an issue with their cause, but you can't pick and choose. Like with the young girl that was shot and killed in Washington, D.C. a couple of days ago. I didn't see the Black Lives Matter marching for that. That didn't have anything to do with the police, that was black on black crime. Ultimately there is a bigger goal, as opposed to pointing the finger all the time, lets come together, lets talk, lets have these conversations, so we can come to a resolution on how we can have a better relationship with the community.

***How can we try to reinstall trust in the police force within the black community when you have incidents like a kid shooting up 17 people and the police will arrest him knowing he had a gun, but the police will shoot the black kid they thought had one? An example most often used is, Dylan Roof got a trip to Burger King on his way to jail.***

Like with Michael Brown, in his case with that officer, that officer represents the police department, but his actions were his actions. That situation, I'm pretty sure, could have been handled much differently. For the police department, it's important to get to know your community. But for example, in black neighborhoods, they may not respect a white officer coming in, like they would a black officer. In order to bridge the gap, we have to sit down and have these conversations and find out what can we do, because otherwise, it's always going to be pointing fingers. People have to understand that there is a process. Like with the 10-year-old girl that got shot in D.C., the people in the neighborhood are saying that the police aren't doing anything and that if it were to have happened in a white neighborhood it would be something different. First and foremost, people have to understand that the police are not there when it happens. If they were there when it happened, trust me, those four gentleman involved would have been arrested. But for the majority we rely on the community to help us do our job. But the reality is that the code of that neighborhood is, "I ain't snitchin'!" But the minute something happens to one of their loved ones they want people to come forward.

***Speaking of depending upon the community, we have all of these cases where people are calling the police on black people for extremely petty reasons. However, in the case of Stephon Clark, a citizen called the police to report someone breaking the windows of their vehicle. Stephon Clark, unarmed, ends up getting gunned down in his***

***grandmother's backyard by the police. The citizen who called the police came out several days later saying that he would think twice about calling the police to report a crime, if it means that someone potentially innocent is going to lose their life. We do want people to call the police if they need to, but we don't want people to be afraid to call the police because someone might lose their life unnecessarily.***

Racism has always existed, but in my opinion, it is starting to surface more because of Number 45 [Donald Trump], it's almost like inciting a riot. You know people started getting a little more heart and a lot more rambunctious. You know these same things that white people are calling the police on black people for, they do themselves. For example, the Starbucks incident with those two gentlemen. You know there are Caucasian people that go into Starbucks and sit in there all the time and pull out laptops.

**"White people enslaved us for years and now they fear us. Why do you fear us?"**

***Going back to mass incarceration. Something that my husband said to me the other day was, "We need to define what equality in the criminal justice system means, because it means something different to everybody." Then, he asked me this question, "Do we want blacks to have less time for the crimes they commit, or are we asking for whites to have more time for committing those same crimes?" I said, "I don't know, I just want it to be fair!"***

I'm like you, I would like for it to be fair across the board. But for whatever reason, it's just not going to be. When I look back on history and based on what I know, we were in our own countries just minding our business. White people enslaved us for years and now they fear us. Why do you fear us?

***Is there a focus now on de-escalation?***

Yes. There is a focus on de-escalation. We've been stressing it for a while, but we have been going at it heavily for the last few years. Because there is a lot that comes into play when police are stopping citizens. Some citizens are scared and then some will say things like, "Man fuck the police, why the fuck did you pull me over?" And when you come off like that, you have the potential to take me up another notch. But for me, I'm going to go ahead and let you vent. My mother always told me two fools can't talk. I don't have to exercise my authority over you, because you want to loud talk me. I'm going to wait until you're finished. For me, in my experience now, there is no need for me to be raising my voice, trying to flex my authority over you, because now people are just not standing for it. We know now, because we have been doing de-escalation training, there are going to be some situations that you are going to be able to deescalate and there are going to be some now that you try to de-escalate but you are just not able to for one reason or another.

***Should citizens let officers know if they are armed?***

Yes. The way I understand it now, if you have a concealed carry permit, that is something that you are required to let the officer know. In the aftermath of Philando Castile, it forced those people who have those concealed carry permits to do something a little different. If you tell me that, that's fine. My thing is, I don't even want you reaching. I want you to tell me where it is, if you have it on your person, that's fine too. Let me know where it is. Give me some heads up. And if my body cam is on, that's information that is going to help me later if it turns out that the information you gave me is false [regarding where the firearm is located]. Then I would ask, "Do you happen to have your concealed carry permit and registration somewhere on your person? If so, where is it? Don't reach for it. Just tell me where it is. Where is your weapon located in relation to that? Okay, reach for your registration and your concealed carry permit, do not reach for your weapon." Now all of this is on my body cam. So if something does happen, at least I've done what I'm supposed to do. And it's caught on the audio and video of my body cam if this guy does something that I've told him not to do. But yes, you are required to let law enforcement know. Now, on another note, if you get pulled over try to get your license and registration before the officer gets to your vehicle and have both hands at the window, so they can see your hands and you don't have to reach for anything. If you get pulled over at night, turn your interior light on.

"I don't really know how we are going to bridge that gap, but I do know that we have to keep working towards it. If we stop trying then we have failed already. "

***I saw a video recently where two cops used a coin toss app to decide whether or not they were going to arrest a young white girl for reckless driving.***

I saw that video. For me that's disheartening, because the guys I work with for training, I know we go above and beyond to make sure that we put out the best quality training for our officers. Are we going to reach everybody? Probably not. For us in training, I say it's disheartening, because for us the body cam is supposed to be our friend. That's supposed to work for us. That just goes to show you, that is based on the individual. You can't sit there and tell me that for that brief moment you forgot your bodycam was on. You go and pull up an app to do a coin toss to decide whether or not this young lady is going to jail for speeding and you didn't even run the radar, that's crazy. But society sees that as the entire police department, not just those two young ladies, the police officers. When you have these incidents like with Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown-we only focus on the negative stuff and to a degree I get it. It is never put on the positive things that the police department is doing. And the negative stuff is detrimental and it's serious, but that doesn't mean it's the entire police department. It really comes down to training. We as police officers need to know where to draw the line. If you are not within the law, don't stretch it. Then again, that is not the entire police department that's just one individual who is representing, who is wearing the uniform. And unfortunately that's not the way society sees it. But that's not going to deter me. So my job now is to make sure I do the best I can to provide the best quality training to the members of the agency I work for to make sure that we put out the best product that we can, so that there are good officers out there. And then we have to get the community to be able to come in and talk to us. And that is going to be difficult, because the outlook now on the police department is not favorable with the citizens. I don't really know how we are going to bridge that gap, but I do know that we have to keep working towards it. If we stop trying then we have failed already.



## AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

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### Message From the Founder

Thank you again for taking the time to read the newsletter. This newsletter, unintentionally, focused on the Black community's relationship with various aspects of the criminal justice system. We must remain vigilant and alert in regards to this particular relationship. James Baldwin said it best, "It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have." To remain idle in the face of such an atrocious system of oppression is dangerous and the lives of those that get swept up in the system depend greatly upon our actions!

Your Resident Historian,

*Deanna Simmons*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BLACK FAMILY REUNIONS

Black families have had a sordid past in the Americas. When Europeans began enslaving Africans, it was the beginning of the breakdown of black families. Slaves were torn away from their homes in Africa and forced to endure the grueling Middle Passage. Olaudah Equiano said this of his journey on a slave ship, "The loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low...I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me."

Arriving in the Americas following the Middle Passage, however, brought little relief. Upon arrival, Africans were sold on auction blocks and were spread throughout the Caribbean, South America, and what would become the United States. Slavery in the colonies was unique in that it was racially based, it was hereditary, and that the number of slaves grew naturally. Likened to animals, chattel slaves bred new generations. Slave masters understood the value in the ability to increase the number of their slaves, without having to purchase new ones, especially after the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808.

During the time of slavery, which spanned nearly four centuries, family became one of the most important, if not the most important facet of enslaved life. The idea that family was not important to slaves is emphatically wrong. However, the privilege that we share today in the secureness of our familial ties was not offered to slaves. Families were constantly in fear of being torn apart. At any moment, fathers, mothers, children, and other extended family members were at risk of being sold away never to be seen again.

Following emancipation at the end of the Civil War, family members tried desperately to locate long lost family members. Some attempted to post ads in newspapers, however, it was often fruitless as most former slaves could not read. Some people were successful in finding family members, most were not. After slavery ended, the extreme racism in the South drove many former slaves to move away to find better opportunities and safer environments for their loved ones.

Family reunions became an important method to reconnect with long lost relatives and eventually became an integral part of black families for future generations. Today we are able to look forward annually to the time when we can gather, eat, have fun, and enjoy the company of our family. However, we must always remember what a privilege it is, as our ancestors did to have that luxury. It is important to appreciate the family that we have and the importance of it to the survival of our culture.