

SB 683's introduction is what is wrong with the teaching of history through the narrow lens of racism. The development of slavery in America is both more complex and more interesting than this often incomplete when not directly false.

1. As PBS' Africans in America series points out: "It's not clear if the Africans are considered slaves or indentured servants. (An indentured servant would be required to work a set amount of time, then granted freedom.) Records of 1623 and 1624 list them as servants, and indeed later records show increasing numbers of free blacks, some of whom were assigned land." <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p263.html>

2. There are free blacks in the Southern colonies in enough numbers that they both voted and held public office. Stephen B. Weeks, "The History of Negro Suffrage in the South," Political Science Quarterly Vol. 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1894), pp. 671-703 https://www.jstor.org/stable/2139853?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents gives details of the process by which free blacks were disfranchised: North Carolina doing so in 1715, which was "repealed by the king's order in 1734..." South Carolina had to deal with complaints about black voting in 1701 and 1703. The law limiting voting to whites did not appear until 1716. And curiously, non-whites were not prohibited from election to public office until 1759. Virginia prohibited free blacks from voting starting in 1723, but was overturned by the Board of Trade between 1733 and 1766. Georgia disfranchised blacks in 1761.

3. Free blacks served as colonial legislators:

"The first black man to come to Maryland was neither slave nor free. Mathias de Sousa was probably African and Portuguese. He was one of nine indentured servants Jesuit missionaries brought to the province. When the Ark and Dove sailed into the St. Mary's River to settle a new colony in 1634, de Sousa was among the company.

"In 1642, de Sousa served in the Maryland General Assembly, making him the first man of African descent to participate in an assembly in English America. Prior to 1670, any man who was not a servant, regardless of color or religion, could participate and vote in the colonial assembly. That included Mathias de Sousa." <https://www.thebaynet.com/articles/0217/blackhistorymonthmathiasdesousa.html#:~:text=In%201642%2C%20de%20Sousa%20served,That%20included%20Mathias%20de%20Sousa.>

4. There were black slaveholders throughout American history until 1865. Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark's Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South gives a detailed history of how William Ellison, born a slave, became a slaveholder of considerable wealth. His sons attempted to join the Confederate Army; they were rejected because they were black. Ellison did his part for the cause of slavery, buying Confederate war bonds which became valueless after the war. The Ellisons were not unique. Carter G. Woodson, one of the first black historians, compiled 1830 census data into Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015000615842&view=1up&seq=5>

The history of slavery and racism is a dark corner of American history, but it needs to be taught in a complete and accurate way that reflects the complexity of what actually happened. SB 683 seems intent on doing just the opposite.

Clayton E. Cramer author of Black Demographic Data, 1790-1860: A Sourcebook (Greenwood Publishing, 1997).