

# America needs truth-telling, inclusion and reparative acts

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Laura Hill leads the Historic Triangle chapter of Coming to the Table, a national racial reconciliation organization with more than 50 chapters nationwide.

From America's humble beginnings to the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol attack in 2021, there have been intentional moves to replace truth with "feel good" false narratives that paint pretty pictures about emotionally painful chapters of American history.

For centuries school children were taught America began when the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, in 1620. Pilgrims and American Indians then worked together to plant and harvest vegetables and celebrated the first Thanksgiving.

While this story paints a rosy picture, the truth is Jamestown, Virginia, is the birthplace of America. In 1607, English colonists arrived at the mouth of the Powhatan River. They renamed the river in honor of King James I and built a military base called James Fort. This was the beginning of our nation.

While Pilgrims were seeking religious freedom, English colonists were on a business venture financed by the Virginia Company of London, a stock-holding company whose investors expected to be repaid in gold. Although Powhatan villages and towns dotted the landscape, the Powhatans and other Indigenous tribes were displaced when the colonists realized their "gold" in Virginia was tobacco.

In 1619, Africans were brought to Virginia against their will. By the 1660s, slave laws were codified that denied Africans and their descendants control of their lives and destinies for more than 200 years.

So, which story is more palatable to our appetites? The Plymouth Rock story of pursuing religious liberties or the Jamestown story of capitalism, social displacement, racial violence and enslavement?

Fast forward to Jan. 6, 2021. Consider attempts to reframe the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Did U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde really expect Americans to ignore what we saw and believe that Capitol rioters were tourists on “a normal tourist visit”?

Fortunately, in Williamsburg, we know what normal tourist visits look like.

The Capitol attack was a violent riot resulting in deaths, emotional trauma and the arrest of more than 700 people that came on the heels of a year of racial unrest sparked by the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. Communities, organizations and businesses nationwide responded by pledging to work towards racial equality and justice.

Schools and buildings bearing names of Confederate heroes were renamed. The Department of Defense issued a congressional mandate to rename military installations. More than 100 Confederate monuments came down. Even the century-old United Daughters of the Confederacy removed the word “Confederate” from the name of its museum.

But does taking down a monument or changing the name of a building correct false historical narratives? In the case of the UDC, the museum’s name changed, but the exhibits and “Lost Cause” narrative did not.

What does correcting the historical narrative require? It involves committing to three fundamental principles: truth-telling, inclusion and reparative acts.

Truth-telling involves coming face-to-face with the past and making “right” historical “wrongs”. Communities nationwide, including the city of

Williamsburg, have established Truth and Reconciliation Committees to uncover and address their racial histories.

Inclusion involves inviting members of historically marginalized communities to join in developing programming that shares their experiences, which have all too often been intentionally ignored.

Reparative acts involve earmarking resources — time, money and personnel — to address the harm done. William & Mary's Lemon Project is a local example of a reparative act. For more than 10 years, the Lemon Project has been telling the story of Africans the college enslaved, as well as connecting with their descendant community.

The rubber meets the road when we stop allowing ourselves to be spoon-fed false narratives and commit to re-educating ourselves about unsavory parts of America's history.

Today is the National Day of Racial Healing. James City County leaders have issued a proclamation asking residents to join people nationwide who are pursuing racial healing. Let's participate by supporting truth-telling, inclusion and reparative acts designed to correct the historical narrative in the Historic Triangle.

Laura Hill is the founder and director of the Historic Triangle chapter of Coming to the Table.