

Excerpt from “The 1857 Project: Extracting the Poison of Racism from America’s Soul” by William H. Freivogel

The soul of America is its promise of ever expanding freedom, equality and opportunity. The paradox of America is that over four centuries our Founders and our leaders reneged on this promise by embracing a devil’s bargain with slavery, segregation, racial superiority and racism.

It’s like opposite sides of the same coin—good and evil, shiny and tarnished. They are opposite ends of the long arc of the moral universe that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama said “bends toward justice.”

Anyone who doubts the centrality of slavery, segregation and racism to the American story—from 1619 through today and for generations to come—isn’t paying attention.

Over the past two centuries, perhaps no other region of the country has been so entwined as St. Louis, Missouri and Illinois with America’s struggle to extract the poison of 1619 from its soul. Race is at the heart of the biggest stories in St. Louis this century.

Four hundred years after Jamestown colonists brought the first enslaved people to America, our original sin and efforts to redress it play out every day in post-Ferguson reforms and sadly in the heavy death toll COVID-19 claims among blacks.

Since Ferguson, reform-minded prosecutors won elections in St. Louis, St. Louis County and around the country. Municipal court reform, bail reform, police and prosecutorial misconduct, racist police postings on social media—all dominate the news. St. Louis’s first black prosecutor filed a lawsuit this year under the Ku Klux Klan Act alleging a conspiracy against her by the white police union and legal establishment to block her reforms. Yes, race is central to it all.

Meanwhile, the first 12 people who died of COVID-19 in St. Louis were black. Seventy percent of those who died in Chicago through the second week of April were black. The inequality in life expectancy between rich and poor zip codes, white and black zip codes, never has been so stark. (See Weiss, Page 26 ) Nikole Hannah-Jones’ 1619 essay in the New York Times magazine last year on the centrality of race to the American experience is a profound statement of a truth that has long been in plain sight: Slavery, segregation and racism are central to what America means. They are central to the histories of St. Louis, Missouri and Illinois.

It is a continuum running from Jamestown, to the Declaration of Independence, to the Constitution, to the Missouri Compromise, to Dred Scott, to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, to the 1917 East St. Louis race riot, to J. Edgar Hoover’s dirty tricks against Rev. King, to the FBI’s planting of anti-King editorials in the Globe-Democrat, to the COINTELPRO plots against Black Liberators in Cairo, Illinois, to the Jefferson Bank protests, to the landmark housing discrimination victories won against racial covenants and exclusionary zoning, to the unveiling of the Veiled Prophet, to the nation’s biggest school desegregation program, to the legal fights of two Missouri attorneys general to end desegregation, to the Kirkwood City Hall massacre, to the death of Michael Brown on a Ferguson street.

Many of these episodes represent both the good and bad—the evil of racism and the fights to overcome it. The Declaration declared all men equal, but did it include blacks? The

Constitution protected slavery but never mentioned it directly. Sen. Stephen A. Douglas said the Founders wanted slavery “forever;” but Abraham Lincoln called it an evil that had to be expunged because a House Divided could not stand. It didn’t.

The nation’s biggest legal fights against housing discrimination were here in St. Louis, and African Americans won them. The nation’s most expensive court-ordered school desegregation program was here, and it eventually attracted the political and public support to raise graduation rates and college-attendance rates for four decades. Michael Brown died here, but the criminal justice reforms and rekindled racial enlightenment that followed have been transformational.

In a special issue this month, GJR explores the history of race in the Land of Dred Scott. Call it the 1857 project because one of the most important chapters in the nation’s story occurred here with the Dred Scott decision reading blacks out of the Constitution and the Lincoln-Douglas debates the next year over whether America could endure part slave and part free.